The Scenic Route

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/465965.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	South Park
Relationships:	Kyle Broflovski/Stan Marsh, Kenny McCormick/Butters Stotch
Characters:	Eric Cartman, Wendy Testaburger
Language:	English
Collections:	International Fanworks Day 2022 - Classic Fic Recs, Its Pretty Gay If You Ask Me, South Park Recomendations, charm
Stats:	Published: 2012-07-22 Words: 116,313 Chapters: 8/8

The Scenic Route

by hollycomb

Summary

The boys embark on a six day road trip to California before separating for college. Cartman is a pain in the ass, Kenny has no future, Butters is in crisis, and Kyle doesn't know how he'll say goodbye to Stan.

- Translation into Français available: The Scenic Route by ElderAurore
- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: [授权翻译] The Scenic Route by Tyvoir

Chapter 1

Graduation day is abnormally hot, held outside in the high school's football stadium. Kyle is sweating under his nylon robe before the ceremony has even started. Their graduating class is small, and he's uncomfortably close to Eric Cartman in the alphabetical lineup, looking longingly at the rows behind him. He catches Stan's eye and grins, his face falling when he sees the spot next to Stan that would be occupied by a 'McCormick' if things had gone according to plan. Kenny is working in the electronics department of Wall-Mart this afternoon, and he'll miss most of Clyde's graduation party because of his second job, cashiering at the gas station out by the highway ramp. He claims to like working better than school, but Kyle knows he didn't have much choice.

"Hey, butthole," Cartman says, leaning over the two people between them. Kyle pretends not to hear him and Cartman starts waving his hand around. "Hello, Jew, are you deaf? Don't make me come over there."

"What?" Kyle says, glaring at him.

"Testicle Burger got valedictorian, didn't she?"

"Yeah," Kyle says, somewhat sourly. He's graduating third in their class, Butters second. It was a close race toward the end, and Kyle is still a little bitter about losing to Wendy, though he should be accustomed to it by now.

Cartman grins. "You think she'll need to come make out with me before she starts giving her speech? As is tradition?"

"Dude, that happened once when were like, eight," Kyle says. "Let it go."

"I'm just saying." Cartman preens, stretching his arms up over his head. "It could happen."

"Don't count on it, fat ass." Cartman isn't just fat anymore, he's enormous, and actually won a statewide award for playing defensive back for their high school football team. Apparently - unfairly - his late father's genes have finally done him some good. Kyle played basketball until junior year, when it was taking too much time away from his studies. He made it into Penn State with a full scholarship, but he still resents the fact that he had to give up sports to do it, especially since football has become such a big part of Stan's life over the past four years. Stan joined the team almost on a whim, but now he's headed to UCLA on an athletic scholarship. He's not huge like Cartman, but he's smart and fast and fearless on the field. Kyle never missed a game. Now he'll have to watch Stan on TV.

"Hey, Stan," Cartman calls, turning back toward him. "What do you think - is your girlfriend gonna have to make out with me before her speech?"

"Dude, shut up," Stan says. "Stop obsessing over that. It's so pathetic."

"I'm just saying," Cartman says. It seems to be his new catch phrase; there's a new one every week. "I'm here for her if she needs to work out sexual tension."

Kyle groans, ready to get this over with. Wendy is up on stage, seated in a chair beside the principal. Butters is up there, too, looking glum. He claims to be afraid that his parents will ground him for the whole summer for failing to graduate first in their class. Kyle has been praying that he's just being paranoid. If Butters does get grounded, it will royally fuck up the road trip they're supposed to leave on tomorrow morning, heading toward California, where Stan has to start pre-season football camp in just seven days. It's unfair enough to have their last summer together in South Park shortened to one week; if their road trip is canceled on account of Butters' parents' psycho expectations, Kyle will lose his shit. Kenny is supposed to come, too, but he can't exactly be counted on to contribute gas money, despite his two jobs. His father has been gone for years, and all of his earnings go toward feeding his unemployed mother, deadbeat brother and fourteen-year-old sister.

The graduation ceremony begins with the chorus kids singing a song about climbing every mountain. There's an address from the principal, and then Wendy is invited up to the podium to give her speech. She looks perfectly composed, in no danger of needing to rush down and lay one on Cartman before starting. Ten years later, Kyle still can't believe that happened. Wendy always blew him off whenever he tried to get her to explain it. Cartman coughs out the words *suck my balls* just as Wendy opens her mouth to begin, and she shoots him a look of hellfire.

"We've been through a lot together," she says, and for a moment she actually seems to be speaking to Cartman, but then she turns to look at the rest of their class. "I thought I would be more than ready to leave South Park when the time came, and in many ways I am, but I also feel, as I'm sure many of you do, that our last year here together went by much too fast."

Kyle's ribs ache with the truth of that statement. He'd expected Wendy to start getting political or giving officious advice about how they should live the rest of their lives. This is harder to hear. He doesn't want to think about how quickly the past year went by, how many times he did those same old things with Stan and was able to think, *This is the last time*. Video games on Friday night, skipping lunch period to sneak off campus for burgers, playing basketball until the street lights came on. Some part of Kyle always knew it was all sacred, perfect, some of the best times he'd ever have in his life, but it didn't really hit home until this year. His best friend is going to be living on the opposite side of the country. He's not going to be there in Kyle's bed every Saturday morning, telling Kyle about the weird dreams he had. He's not going to kill time in the weight room while Kyle finishes up his extra credit lab work, isn't going to drive him home, smelling like sweat and chewing gum, letting Kyle pick the radio station. They only have this last week together before everything changes.

"It's a cliche to say that you can't truly appreciate something until it's gone," Wendy says. "But there's a reason we've all heard that before. It feels true. If I'm meant to say something inspirational to you today, that's all I really want to impart: take the time to appreciate what you have while you're still in the moment. Slow down and stop worrying about the future so much that you can't enjoy the present. Tell the people who you love how you really feel while you still have time."

She looks at Kyle, and it feels pointed. The color drains from his face. What the hell is she trying to say? She lets her pause draw out, her eyebrows arching like - like what? Like she pities him? He feels like everyone in the entire stadium is staring at him.

"Don't underestimate each other," Wendy says, looking out into the general crowd again. "We're so often told to believe in ourselves, but we have to believe in and trust our friends, too. As we all drift to the various corners of the world, let's not forget what mattered to us here in South Park. A small town can feel like an extended family, which is frustrating at times, but also such a comfort. I want everyone here to know that I consider you part of my family, and that each of you are irreplaceable to me." She grins and looks at Kyle's row again, but not at him this time. "Except Eric Cartman. Thank you."

She leaves the podium then, Cartman sputtering in disbelief, nervous laughter sneaking through the rows of graduates. The crowd murmurs with some combination of surprise and amusement, and Kyle lets himself snicker loudly. He glances over at Cartman, who is watching Wendy as if already plotting his revenge.

"Well," the principal says, flustered as she returns to the mike. "Thank you - ah, Wendy, for - that. We will now begin awarding our individual students with degrees. First row, can you stand up please?"

They file across their stage to accept their degrees, pausing in two designated spots so they can have their pictures taken by the professional photographer who will sell the shots to their parents. Kyle's father is videotaping the whole thing, and it makes Kyle's cheeks burn to think that moment when Wendy looked at him will be part of the Broflovski family video library for all eternity.

When the ceremony ends, the graduates and parents mill around outside the stadium, hugging each other and taking more photos. Kyle sees Stan and pushes through the crowd, a dreamlike sense of doom flickering in his chest, as if Stan will disappear before Kyle can reach him. Wendy wants him to appreciate the moment? Fine. He falls into Stan's arms when they open for him, hugs him hard.

"Dude," Stan says, laughing. "Can you believe she did that? She didn't tell me that she'd been planning that. Do you think it was spontaneous? *Except Eric Cartman*. God, that was so awesome."

"Yeah." Kyle releases Stan and steps back. He's sweltering under his robe, can't wait to get home and take a shower before the luncheon that his parents are hosting for all his visiting relatives. He knows they must be looking for him in the crowd and hopes he can lay low for a little bit longer, Stan's hands still clamped over his shoulders.

"Dude, this is crazy," Stan says. "We were in elementary school, like. Five minutes ago."

"I know." Kyle doesn't want to have this conversation here, in the midst of a sea of people who are slapping Stan's back as they pass by. "We should find Butters."

"You seriously think his parents won't let him go?" Stan says. "Just because Wendy beat him for valedictorian?"

"You never know with those freaks." It wouldn't be the first time Wendy had ruined Kyle's plans to spend time with Stan. Wendy and Stan were on again off again all throughout high school, but they were on again enough times to make Kyle feel ditched when he had to spend the occasional Friday night with Kenny and Butters, unless Butters was grounded, which was usually the case. Friday nights with Kenny basically consisted of babysitting him while he got shit-faced, and the only consolation would be that Kyle could look forward to at least spending the night with Stan after his dates with Wendy. Sometimes Stan would slip in late, and Kyle would wake up to the feeling of Stan getting under the blankets with him, whispering *Go back to sleep, dude, it's just me*.

"Boys!"

Kyle cringes at the sound of his mother's voice. She's been picture-crazy all morning, must have taken at least eight thousand shots of Kyle posing in his robe, Ike hunched under Kyle's arm.

"Brace yourself," Kyle says to Stan. "She's going to want a billion pictures of us." Kyle shoves his mortarboard hat back on, hiding his hair.

"There you are, oh, look at you two!" Kyle's mother pinches their cheeks simultaneously, jostling them. "Mazel tov, Stan! Your mother told me all about your football scholarship. You must be so excited!"

"Yeah," Stan says. "It kind of sucks that I have to go out there so early, though. I would have liked a little time off here first."

"Well, you boys will have a great time on your road trip adventure. Just remember to be safe - don't pick up any hitchhikers. And don't leave your elbows hanging out the open window, you'll get sunburned. And -"

"Mom!" Kyle says. "We're not five years old. Where's Dad and Ike?"

"They're over by the concession stand with the rest of the family. Come on, bubbeh, your grandpa's asking for you."

"Don't you want a picture of me and Stan in our robes?" Kyle asks. Stan laughs, and Kyle feels like an idiot, but he can't help it. This is all going by too fast.

"Of course I do!" Kyle's mother says, lifting her camera. "Now, put your arms around each other. That's right."

Stan pulls Kyle in close, and Kyle can feel the heat of him through his robe, knows that he's soaked with sweat beneath his, too. He wraps his arm around Stan's waist, his fingers cinching in tightly as they both smile for the camera.

"You boys!" Kyle's mother says, looking like she might cry when she's finished taking pictures. "What will you do without each other?"

"Lots of texting," Stan says, and Kyle forces a laugh.

"Stan!" A hand shoots up through the sea of graduates, and Kyle lets go of Stan when he sees that it's Wendy, her hair pulled up into a high ponytail now. She groans when she reaches them, wiping sweat from her forehead.

"I'm under siege," she says.

"By Cartman?" Stan says.

"No, by everyone who's congratulating me for ripping on him." Her mouth quirks, and she peeks back over her shoulder. "I don't know. Maybe I shouldn't have said that."

"Are you kidding me?" Kyle says. "He more than deserves it."

"Seriously, and that was freaking hilarious," Stan says.

"Kyle!" His mother is inching away, waving to him. "Come on, hurry, I still have to make the potato salad!"

"You guys can come to my family lunch if you want," Kyle says, knowing that they won't. Stan told him yesterday that he and Wendy have 'a lot to talk about' before he leaves with Kyle and the others on the road trip to California. Wendy will be going to school in California, too, but all the way up in Berkeley. They're still trying to decide if they want to try to stay together. To Kyle it seems like they had a hard enough time staying together when they lived five minutes away from each other, but he hasn't offered his opinion on the subject.

"Maybe I'll stop by," Stan says. "I do love your mom's potato salad." He winks and Kyle grins, waving as he backs away. There's already a little ball of panic in the center of his chest, as if the countdown has officially begun. Six and a half days with Stan left.

"You're coming to Clyde's later, right?" Wendy calls.

"Yep," Kyle shouts back before turning to follow his mom. He's promised Stan that he'll at least try to get drunk tonight, since it's the last ever high school party of their lives. Stan usually just gets tipsy, nowhere near the kind of state Kenny puts himself in, but he wants to 'blow it out' tonight, apparently. Kyle has never been drunk before and isn't looking forward to it. He doesn't like feeling out of control, and doesn't want to be hungover when they leave tomorrow morning.

After more pictures, he returns to his house with his family and makes himself scarce as soon as they're through the door, saying he needs a shower. His cousin Kyle is staying his room, but that just gives Kyle a good excuse to spend the night over at Stan's. The bag he packed for the trip is sitting by the door, and only when he sees it does he remember that he forgot to find Butters and make sure everything is cool. It probably is; they would have heard otherwise by now if it wasn't.

The lunch with his family is fine, everyone pressing cards, gifts and money into his hands. Kyle has always had a hard time trying to get a word in edgewise when it comes to his extended family, so he mostly sits quietly until they start asking him about his future plans.

"Law school," his father says before Kyle can speak. "Columbia, maybe."

"Oh, you'll love New York," Kyle's aunt Mindy says, as if it's already settled.

"Or maybe someplace out West," Kyle says, wondering where Stan will be by the time he's thinking about law school. Playing pro football?

"West, oy, all that smog," his mother says, waving the idea away with her hand. "And the earthquakes! His little friend Stan is going to college out there," she says to his aunts, who make *ahh* noises as if that explains this particular whim. Kyle's face gets hot. He checks his phone, wondering how Stan's talk with Wendy went. There's a new text from Stan:

emergency. you free?

Kyle thinks of Butters, dread clouding the clear sky of his dreams about this road trip. Without Butters to help them pay for gas, they'll have to dip into their book fund money, and with gas prices the way they are, even that might not cover it. Stan doesn't start getting living expense money from his football program until the official start of the season, and he's counting on what little money he was able to save while working at the bowling alley last summer to get him through until then.

Be right there, Kyle sends back. He makes excuses with his family, who all complain that he's rushing away too soon, though he's been chit-chatting with them for hours. He heads for the front door despite their protests, and they turn their attention to Ike, asking him what *his* future plans are.

"I want to groom dogs," Ike says, just to hear them all gasp with horror, and Kyle smirks as he slips out the front door. His little brother is a genius, thirteen years old and already a sophomore in high school, and a tremendous smart ass.

Stan's house is clogged with relatives, too, though not as many. It's strange to see his father and mother together again, even temporarily, but they seem to be getting along fine, laughing about something in the kitchen. Stan's various uncles are lined up on the couch, sipping beers, and they wave to Kyle as he follows Stan up to his room.

"What's going on?" Kyle asks. "Did you talk to Wendy?"

"Wendy?" Stan says, frowning.

"Yeah. About, uh. You said you were going to -"

"Oh." Stan shakes his head. "No, right after you left Butters sauntered over and announced that he can't make the trip."

"What? Shit!" Kyle groans and puts his hands over his face. "Fuck that fucker's parents."

"For real," Stan says. "But I don't think we have to cancel the trip."

"Stan, you can't use your food money for the next three months for gas. Shit, what are we going to do?" Kyle doesn't want to cancel the trip, either, but he hates the thought of Stan

eating only ketchup sandwiches and passing out from malnutrition during football practice.

"We could get someone else to come with us," Stan says.

"Who? We're leaving tomorrow, dude." Kyle freezes, wondering if he means Wendy. He shouldn't hate the idea, but it's like being handed a grenade, all of his hopes for this trip blowing apart. Having her there would change the dynamic, to put it mildly.

"There's really only one person," Stan says, and Kyle groans.

"Stan, I don't -"

"C'mon, dude, he's not as bad as he used to be."

"He? Wait. Who are you talking about?"

"Who do you think I'm talking about? Cartman."

"*Cartman*?" If there's anyone who would destroy Kyle's last six days with Stan more effectively than Wendy would, it's him. "Have you lost your fucking mind?"

"Think about it, alright? He always has money 'cause he's spoiled as shit, we know he doesn't have any plans for the next week 'cause we're his only friends, and - I don't know, Kyle, shit. I was really looking forward to this trip."

"Me, too!" Kyle has meticulously planned every detail, printed the Google maps, updated the Garmin, created extensive playlists for each state they'll travel through. "But this - he would ruin it."

"Only if we let him," Stan says. "He just likes to get a rise out of us, but what's he really going to do that would be so bad?"

"Uh! Make us stop for food every three feet? Fart? Make fun of all my music? Talk nonstop about how the Jews are destroying America?"

"It's nothing we haven't learned to ignore," Stan says. "Aside from the farts."

"Dude, the farts alone."

"I know, it's not ideal, but I really think it's our only choice. Let's go up to Wall-Mart and ask Kenny what he thinks."

Kyle is miserable as he rides in the passenger seat of Stan's car, particularly because this was what he'd been looking forward to so much: the peace between the two of them while one is driving and the other is riding beside him, the fact that they don't even need to talk. Butters talks a lot, but Kyle has never had a problem tuning him out, and half the time Butters doesn't seem to care if anyone responds to his chatter. Cartman demands attention at all times. He would spoil their serenity with glee.

"Cheer up, dude," Stan says as they walk toward the front doors of the massive Wall-Mart. He puts his arm around Kyle's shoulders. "It's gonna be okay. I promise."

The words stick painfully in Kyle's chest, because it's not a promise Stan can make anymore. It's not going to be okay. Road trip or not, they'll be so far away from each other soon.

Kenny is pricing DVDs when they find him in the electronics department. He's wearing his saggy blue Wall-Mart vest and looks half-asleep. Stan takes Kyle's arm and stops him before they can walk closer.

"Don't mention anything about graduation," Stan says, whispering. "Unless he brings it up."

"Dude, of course."

They've both gotten very protective of Kenny in recent years. When Kenny's dad left it was with a bang: Kenny showed up to the bus stop with a black eye, a cracked rib, a gash on his cheek, bruises on his neck. Stan and Kyle were speechless, and it was Stan who ultimately knew what to do. He put his hand on Kenny's back and guided him gently from the bus stop to Stan's empty house, Kyle following. None of them spoke. When they got there, Kenny flopped onto Stan's bed, his eyes red-rimmed but dry. Stan took off his shoes and stretched out on one side of Kenny, and Kyle followed his lead, lying down at Kenny's other side. They watched TV in silence, Kenny falling in and out of a fitful sleep, rolling against Stan for comfort, turning to clutch at Kyle's arm. They did that every day for a week, mostly in silence, Stan and Kyle taking turns going to the kitchen to make sandwiches and fetch Advil for Kenny, who winced every time he rolled over. Kyle got in trouble for skipping school and was grounded for a month, but was worth it. Kenny started laughing again by day three, at dumb TV commercials and Stan's stories about his uncle Jimbo.

"'Sup, assholes?" Kenny says as they approach, grinning. He puts down his price sticker machine and slaps Stan's hand in greeting, whacks Kyle on the back. He's still alarmingly physical with them, prone to falling asleep with his head on their shoulders when he's drunk. "How was the big event?"

"Fine," Stan says. "Wendy insulted Cartman in her speech."

"Seriously? I wish I'd seen that."

"My dad has it on video," Kyle says, maybe stupidly. It's been awkward since Kenny left school, trying to figure out what will or won't hurt his feelings. He never lets on that anything has, but there's something less authentic about his lazy grin when Kyle and Stan start talking about college.

"Dude, bad news," Stan says. "Butters' parents were serious about the valedictorian thing. He can't come."

Kenny's grin disappears, and for a moment he looks like he's going to kick over the whole display of DVDs. He curses and turns away from them as if he needs a moment to compose himself. Kyle glances at Stan. They both knew Kenny was looking forward to this trip, and for different reasons than their own. He's never been on a real vacation, has never seen the

Pacific Ocean. They're all well aware that this could be his last chance to have even six days worth of freedom. He had to beg his boss for the time off.

"This is fucked up," Kenny says. "He's eighteen now. Why can't he just tell them to go fuck themselves?"

"You know they wouldn't let him apply for scholarships," Kyle says. "Just so they could have total control over where he went to school and how he's going to pay for it. They're psycho, dude. Good luck trying to tell Butters that, though."

"We should have applied for scholarships for him," Stan says.

"He wouldn't have accepted any," Kenny says. "Not if they didn't want him to. Goddammit, Butters. Fuck!"

"But don't worry, we came up with an idea!" Stan says. He rubs his hand across Kenny's back, trying to calm him down. Maybe the two of them are a little overly physical with him, too. They both grew accustomed to petting him while he recovered from his injuries, usually doing it while he was asleep, having casual conversations over the top of his head without even realizing that they were holding his hip or rolling his dirty bangs between their fingers. He was like their egg, and they were so proud of themselves for mending the cracks in his shell.

"The idea is that we bring Cartman instead," Kyle says. "I think I'd rather sell an organ for gas money."

"I wish I could give you guys some," Kenny says. He picks up the pricing machine again, angrily slapping $9.99 on a Jurassic Park DVD. "It's just these fucking car repairs, and I need the car for work -"

"Dude, no, it's totally fine," Stan says. He squeezes Kenny's shoulder. "And I think Cartman would be willing to help out. He'll probably be really flattered to be asked."

"Yeah, and we'll pay the price for six days," Kyle says. He groans. "Do you think there's any way we could persuade Butters to go against his parents?"

"If he does they won't pay for his college," Kenny says.

"Yeah, we'd better not fuck with that whole situation," Stan says. "Let's just ask Cartman at the party tonight and see what happens. You're coming, right?" he says to Kenny, who nods. He's listless again, the way he looked before he saw them walking over.

"Maybe it could work with Cartman," Kyle says. He doesn't want to crush Kenny, or his own dreams of being out on the open road with Stan, under a big sky. "Maybe he'd just sleep a lot."

"Yeah," Stan says. Kenny scoffs.

"Why do they do this to him?" he says.

"Who?" Kyle asks.

"Butters' parents. Fuck. Pisses me off." He's mumbling now, pricing DVDs without really looking at them. Kyle and Stan exchange another look. Before Kenny's father left, Kenny had the worst home life in South Park, and after he was gone Butters contended for the title, though he's always had plenty to eat and never had to clean up his parents' puke from the kitchen floor, so far as Kyle knows. Still, there's something very insidious about Butters' parents particular brand of control. Kenny once said that he thought that Butters' father probably hit him, too, but wouldn't answer Kyle when he asked why.

They leave Kenny in a bad mood, without having learned how he feels about the Cartman plan. Stan buys a cherry slushie from the concession counter at the Wall-Mart, and they take turns sipping from it as they head toward his car.

"Want to hang out before the party?" Stan asks. Kyle nods and swipes the slushie. He feels stupidly victorious, glad that Stan isn't spending these last daylight hours with Wendy. The talk must have been postponed indefinitely. That would fit their general dating style. Wendy is a great orator and Stan is one of the most open people Kyle has ever known, but they revert to elementary school note passing when it comes to discussing their relationship.

They spend the rest of the sweltering afternoon in Stan's room, shades drawn and the floor fan pointed at the bed, where they've stretched out to watch old kung fu movies on Stan's laptop. Stan thinks they're hilarious, and Kyle is usually bored by them, but he doesn't mind watching them like this, the laptop resting on Stan's stomach, rising and falling with his breath.

"Should we call Cartman?" Stan asks at one point. Kyle blinks drowsily at the laptop screen, close to falling asleep.

"No," he says. "Let's wait until the last possible moment. Maybe some miracle will happen."

"Like what, dude? My dad's gonna run in here and announce that he won the lottery?"

"Yeah, and that he spent the winnings on a Coors Light refinery," Kyle says. Stan laughs and punches his shoulder.

"I can't believe we're gonna be free of our parents," he says.

"Yeah." It doesn't feel like it will really count, not if they're living on opposite coasts.

"You really gonna drink with me tonight?" Stan asks. Kyle groans. He was hoping Stan had forgotten.

"I'll try," he says.

"It's not like, advanced math, dude. You don't try, you just swallow."

Kyle's face gets hot, and he stares at the screen until Stan looks at it, too. Stan lets out a long, slow breath that makes the laptop sink especially low. He seems tired. Kyle wants to fall

asleep with him in this bed at least twice more, and he's just about to drift off to sleep when someone pounds on the door, startling them both up into sitting positions.

"Stan!" It's Randy, of course. "Stan, what are you doing? Is Kyle in there? Grandma's asking for you."

Stan groans and shifts the laptop so that it's resting on Kyle's hips. He reaches over to pause the movie, and it feels like he's pressing a button on Kyle, to keep him in place.

"I'll be right back," Stan says, and Kyle nods. As soon as Stan is gone, the door shut behind him, Kyle opens the laptop's web browser and looks at the history. Stan is too oblivious about the finer points of computing to bother to hide his tracks. Most of the sites he's visited are boring: UCLA, The Denver Post, the Broncos' official website and a few fan blogs. There are humor sites that Kyle introduced him to years ago, a couple of free porn portals, and Gmail. Kyle clicks in the url bar, going for one of the humor sites, but his finger slips, and the Gmail screen pops open.

He glances at the door. There are no sounds from the hallway. The most recent email in Stan's inbox is from Wendy, already read. He can see the first sentence in the preview: "I got my course catalog in the mail today!" He shouldn't click, but that doesn't seem too personal. Stan probably wouldn't even care. He checks the door again.

I got my course catalog in the mail today! This is so exciting. I've already highlighted like fifty classes that I want to take this semester. There's a whole class just about Mayan Mathematical Theory. It's like I'm actually going to join a meaningful conversation that I was only eavesdropping on before, you know?

Kyle snorts, imagining Stan's response to this. His favorite senior year class was Home Ec, one of many slacker electives he took to fill out his schedule. He would sit in the back with the stoners and crack up when they told hilarious anecdotes about trying to order chicken nuggets from the Taco Bell drive thru while high. Stan isn't stupid, and he's certainly capable of meaningful conversations, but he's never going to want to have one about Mayan Mathematical Theory.

Heart hammering, Kyle opens the previous emails in the chain. He's afraid he'll find pornographic exchanges or declarations of love, but it's mostly one or two line emails about movies they're going to see or someone who pissed them off at school. Nothing that Kyle reads is a surprise: he's heard all of this from Stan already, even the stuff about Wendy getting in a fight with Bebe for having sex with Clyde on her bed during the after prom party.

Kyle hears Stan jogging up the stairs, and he shuts the web browser in panic, accidentally closing the movie, too. Pretending this was intentional, he snaps the whole laptop shut, pushes it away and rolls onto his side, just getting his eyes closed in time to fake sleep as Stan opens the door. His heart is beating so fast that he's afraid Stan will hear it slapping against his mattress. Kyle lies there rigidly, his hands clamped between his knees as he listens to Stan move about the room. Stan opens something, there's a spray: reapplying deodorant? Definitely; Kyle can smell it when Stan walks closer. He leans over Kyle to collect the laptop, and Kyle hears it clatter onto Stan's desk. Kyle expects him to pull out the chair, maybe respond to Wendy's message about the Mayans, but he returns to the bed and settles

down beside Kyle with a sigh. In his haste, Kyle didn't really leave him enough room, and they're closer than they usually are, Kyle's nose almost touching Stan's shoulder. Uncomfortable with this, he moans and pretends to wake up, giving Stan a few slow, dramatic blinks.

"Sorry," Kyle says. "That movie kind of sucked."

"That's the point," Stan says, grinning. He rolls onto his side as Kyle scoots toward the wall, giving him space. "Don't sleep through the party," Stan says.

"It's this heat," Kyle says. "It wears me out."

"You sound like my grandma."

Kyle shoves him lazily, and Stan shoves back, his hand sliding from Kyle's shoulder and flopping onto the mattress between them. It should be awkward, their heads together on the pillow, the quiet of the room, the smell of Stan's deodorant. It's never been awkward. This is the only place in the world where all the tension drains from Kyle's shoulders. Even his own bed doesn't do the trick.

"It'll be okay," Stan says, and Kyle stares at him, surprised.

"Yeah?" He didn't realize that Stan knew how worried he's been, and didn't think hearing him say so would make Kyle believe that it could be okay, the end of their storied childhood together.

"Cartman will be so happy to be included, he won't give you that hard of a time," Stan says. Kyle huffs. He opens his mouth to tell Stan that it's not the road trip he's worried about, not really, but there's no point. Stan would just feel guilty for abandoning him to his new football life, and Kyle doesn't want that.

"I guess it'll be fine," he says, just to make Stan feel better. It won't be. Stan overestimates everyone, even Cartman.

"Go to sleep if you want to," Stan says, rolling onto his back. He reaches for a book on his bedside table. "I'm gonna read for awhile."

"Read?"

"Yeah, Kyle, sometimes I read books." He holds it up so Kyle can see the cover: UCLA Course Catalog. Kyle feels wounded, as if Stan just had a secret conversation with Wendy, here in the midst of one of their last moments together.

"What are you going to sign up for?" Kyle asks, scooting up so that he can see the pages.

"No clue," Stan says. "Intro everything. Maybe some weird language."

"Take Hebrew," Kyle says, and Stan laughs.

"That'd be kind of awesome, actually," he says. "We could really piss Cartman off."

"Yeah," Kyle says, his smile fading as he thinks about how useless that would be now, having a secret best friends language. How often are they going to be together in situations where pissing Cartman off will be a goal? Cartman is going to Yale, which burns Kyle's ass, because he got accepted there, too, but wasn't offered a scholarship. It made financial sense to go to Penn State on a full ride, and he doesn't regret his decision, though listening to Cartman gloat about the fact that his mother is somehow bankrolling his Yale education has been agony.

They lie there for hours just reading through the book, both bursting into laughter when they see that a Yiddish language course is offered. Stan circles it and draws stars around it. He actually seems excited about his electives, though he doesn't pick anything as obscure as Mayan Mathematics. He circles Ecology, Modern Film, and The History of the American Automotive Industry. Kyle makes a chart for him so he can check the availability of his electives versus the core classes he'll have to take. He realizes as he factors in football practice hours that he was picturing himself taking all of these classes with Stan, helping him study. Outside, the sun starts to dip.

"Look at you, all organized," Stan says, taking the chart from Kyle. "You just planned out the next six months of my life in less than an hour."

"It hasn't been less than an hour," Kyle says. He sits up on his elbow to look over Stan's chest, at the clock on the bedside table. "It's almost seven."

"Seriously? Damn." He looks up at Kyle. "Felt like less than an hour."

"Should we get ready for the party?" Kyle asks, still not ready for that conversation, the one where they talk about how fast these final days together are passing.

"Yeah," Stan says. He puts his schedule and the course catalog aside, digs in the top drawer of his bedside table. At the back there are two little liquor bottles. "Vodka or rum?" he asks, holding them up.

"This is what we're doing to get ready?" Kyle feels heat creeping down the back of his neck. "Won't your parents smell it on us?"

"Dude, we're not driving, and it's our last high school party ever. My dad would probably think I was weird if I didn't have a little booze on my breath. So which one do you want?"

"Which one's easier?"

Stan groans and sits up cross-legged, facing Kyle, who does the same, scooting forward until their knees are just barely touching.

"Let's both have half of each," Stan says. "Try the vodka first. It has less of a taste."

Kyle would not agree that vodka has less of a taste than anything. It tastes like fire, and the rum is actually worse, especially as a follow up. He barely gets down four sips between the two bottles, and is surprised when Stan finishes them off with ease. Stan drinks with his football buddies on Saturday nights, at somebody's house where the parents don't care. Kyle sometimes gets drunk texts from him, and has archived a few of the classics: *hey kyle yuo*

shoud see this one vidao of a dogs really fuanny and *im gonan make you panckes for your bday ok*

Stan insists that Kyle change into one of his shirts, a lightweight button-up that Kyle wears open over a fresh white undershirt, also Stan's. The clothes smell like Stan, and they make Kyle feel a little tougher, taller. He decides to be a better sport about drinking once they get to the party.

"We can't overdo it, though," he says as they walk together toward Clyde's, eating corn chips from a bag that Stan swiped from the kitchen on their way out. "We have to think about the drive tomorrow. Five hours to Grand Mesa."

"I'll drive the first leg," Stan says. He puts his arm around Kyle and tugs him closer, giving him a shake. "You can just sleep it off."

"Yeah, right, with Cartman in the backseat? Or the front - he'll probably insist on sitting up front the whole time in exchange for gas money."

"No way," Stan says. "When I'm driving, you're in the passenger seat, and vice versa. That's non-negotiable."

Kyle shoves more corn chips in his mouth to hide his grin. Stan keeps his arm around him for most of the walk, talking about the music he picked out for the trip. He doesn't have the same music-related angst that Kyle does, doesn't care if people think his songs are stupid. Kyle carefully avoided anything that Kenny might make fun of, and he's glad for that now. Cartman will be brutal in that department, too.

"Cartman is not allowed to pick any of the music," Kyle says.

"Noted," Stan says. "Let's make sure he's actually willing to come with us before we make any more rules about him, though, okay?"

"God, I hate that we're in the position of asking him for a *favor*. Like, oh, please, Cartman, ruin our road trip! We're begging you!"

"He won't ruin it. Calm down, dude. Look, it's a party."

They're standing in front of Clyde's house now, the sunset fading into deep blue as kids begin to stream in through Clyde's front door and gather on the lawn. Kyle experiences the familiar pre-party dread: Stan will know exactly where to go, who to talk to, and Kyle will just drift at his side. At some point, Stan will disappear with Wendy, and Kyle will be left to fend off Cartman and make sure that Kenny doesn't fall off of anything too steep. Sometimes that job belongs to Butters, but he definitely won't be here tonight.

Inside Clyde's house, the party is just beginning to get loud, music blaring from the living room and people flocking to the kitchen to grab the party food while it's still available. Cartman is there, eating from the giant sub that has been cut into individual portions.

"Trying to finish the whole thing?" Kyle asks.

"You wish you could eat like a real man, Jew," Cartman says, his mouth full of shredded lettuce and ham. "We can't all be lactose intolerant and diabetic."

"How the hell did you not end up with diabetes?" Stan asks Cartman. He gets a slice of sandwich for himself, and hands one to Kyle. "Your diet is like ninety percent fructose corn syrup."

"That bullshit about processed foods being bad for you is all a conspiracy," Cartman says. "Fronted by organic farmers. I'm just lucky my mom was smart enough not to fall for that hippie shit."

"Yeah, lucky you." Stan shoots Kyle a look, begging him not to get into a debate with Cartman about this. Kyle takes a bite of his sandwich instead, annoyed.

"So, listen," Stan says to Cartman. "You know how I have to start football camp in a week?"

"I can't believe you're going to play college football," Cartman says. "I could have played - I got all kinds of scholarship offers, I mean, like, they were basically offering me a new hooker for every night of the week at Ole Miss - but that shit's for poor people. They're just going to take advantage of you, Stan."

"Cool, thanks for the advice," Stan says. He's gotten good at ignoring Cartman, something Kyle was never able to master. "Anyway, we're actually driving out there tomorrow, together, me and Kyle, and we were thinking, hey. Why not bring Kenny and Cartman along? It'd be like old times."

Cartman studies them, narrowing his eyes, trying to figure out what they have to gain from this. Kyle keeps his mouth clamped shut and his expression neutral. He glances over at Stan, who is better at bluffing.

"Kenny's going?" Cartman says.

"Yeah."

"Have you asked him yet?"

"No," Stan says. "We wanted to ask you first."

"Right, 'cause you need funding." Cartman smirks. "And Kenny's a broke piece of shit, as always. Can he even get time off of his janitorial internship to go on a road trip?"

"You're such an asshole," Kyle says. Stan touches the small of his back, telling him to shut up.

"I'm pretty sure Kenny can take some time off of work," Stan says. "So what do you say? It'd be fun, right?"

"I'll go on the condition that the Jew can't do any of the driving," Cartman says.

"Fuck you!" Kyle really needs to learn how to not let this get to him, but he's pretty sure that he never will. "I'm a good driver. You're the one who crashed into the Tuckers' mailbox going like, sixty."

"That was on purpose!" Cartman says. He seems to get two feet taller when he's looking for a fight, towering over Kyle. "It was a joke on Craig!"

"We're all going to take turns driving," Stan says, stepping between them. "Don't be a dick, Cartman. Do you want to come or not?"

"Fine," Cartman says. Stan was right; he's obviously beside himself with excitement at being invited, but he's trying not to show it. "I get to pick all the music, though."

"Like hell you do," Kyle says.

"You can pick it when you're driving," Stan says. Kyle gives him a look of fury, but Stan shrugs. "Whoever's driving gets to pick the music. That's only fair."

"Sweet," Cartman says, grinning. Kyle huffs. Cartman doesn't care about music. He'll just pick the most obnoxious shit possible, twangy country and blaring techno.

"So we're leaving pretty early tomorrow," Stan says. "And we're gonna be on the road for six days."

"Don't forget your deodorant," Kyle says, withholding a comment about how Cartman might have reapplied some before showing up at the party. He smells like stale sweat and mayo.

"Only if you promise not to forget your tampons," Cartman says. "Since you're obviously on your period this week."

Stan pulls Kyle out of the kitchen, to prevent further damage. Kyle lets himself be pulled. They head for the dining room, where the alcohol is laid out like a buffet.

"Do Clyde's parents know about this?" Kyle asks as Stan mixes him a drink.

"I think so," Stan says. "They're weird. Here, try this."

"What is it?"

"Vodka, peach schnapps and Sprite." He grins. "I just made it up."

"You should name it," Kyle says, sniffing the cup. It smells like perfume and melted candy.

"Alright," Stan says. "I call it, 'A drink girly enough for Kyle.'"

"Fucker," Kyle says, punching him. The drink is actually kind of tasty, the Sprite masking the taste of the vodka. Stan has a beer, and Kyle finishes his first drink quickly, holding the red plastic cup out so that Stan will make him another.

"Hey, guys!" Bebe says, heading toward them as Kyle sips from his second drink. "I'm glad you could make it!" She always acts like a hostess when Clyde has a party at his parents' house. Bebe has been with Clyde since elementary school. Their fights are legendary, and they're said to have had sex in every single room of the high school, on a dare that, as far as everyone could tell, they posed to each other. They both treat each other like shit in public, but Wendy claims that they care about each other in some twisted way.

"This music is awful, right?" Bebe says. She hangs on Stan's arm, a Smirnoff Ice in her free hand. "I told Clyde the music was awful, but he doesn't listen to anything I say."

"Are you guys going to the same college?" Stan asks.

"Yes, ugh." Bebe frowns, looking through the door that leads into the living room, where Clyde is standing near the sofa, talking to Craig. "Clyde is following me there, more like. He's such a fucking baby, he'd never go to college without his safety net. Whatever, we're broken up. Did Wendy tell you that?"

"Wendy's still mad at you for prom," Kyle says. Stan gives him a wide-eyed look over Bebe's head. Kyle shrugs and drinks more from his plastic cup. This one is stronger than the first, seems like.

"Is she seriously still mad about that?" Bebe asks. She touches her hair self-consciously, peering up at Stan, who shakes his head.

"Kyle's a lightweight," he says. "He's talking shit. She's not mad."

"I didn't even realize that was her bed," Bebe says, frowning. "I was pretty out of it. I offered to have her sheets dry cleaned!"

"She's fine," Stan says, waving his hand through the air. "Is she here yet?"

"I saw her out on the back porch," Bebe says. "Why? Are you guys going to have 'the talk' now? You can use Clyde's bedroom if you want!"

"Use my bedroom for what?" Clyde asks, appearing in the doorway. He takes a beer from the cooler and slaps Stan's hand in greeting, ignoring Kyle. Clyde got too cool to acknowledge Kyle back in middle school, when he was one of the first boys in eighth grade to get a blow job. Bebe was the giver, and she slapped the shit out of him in the middle of the hallway when she found out that he'd told everyone.

"I don't need to use Clyde's bedroom," Stan says.

"He and Wendy still haven't had 'the talk,'" Bebe says, whispering loudly. She seems pretty lit already, and Kyle thinks this is as good an excuse as any to make himself another drink.

"We're not gonna have the talk," Stan says. "We're just gonna play it by ear. See what happens when we get out there."

"You'd better not leave her for a cheerleader," Bebe says. Kyle laughs into his plastic cup at the thought. Stan with a cheerleader, someone pocket-sized who he could fuck after the

games. He'd propose to her on the jumbotron at a Broncos game. She'd be wearing fuzzy white ear muffs, glittery eye shadow. Kyle has thought about this before, and what excuses he might come up with to keep from having to stand on that altar, the best man. It'd be easier to watch him marry Wendy.

"Give him a break," Clyde says. "He's gonna get so much pussy in college. Are they gonna let you play quarterback?" he asks, whacking Stan in the chest.

"I won't know til after camp," Stan says. "I'm gonna go find Wendy."

"See," Bebe says. She blows a raspberry at Clyde. "He loves her, you dumb ass. He doesn't care about anonymous pussy."

"I'll bet you a hundred bucks they don't stay together," Clyde says to Bebe once Stan has gone.

"I'll take that bet," Kyle says, because he's pretty sure they will, but Clyde ignores him, so he just tops off his drink and follows Stan out to the porch. Usually he hangs back once Stan goes in search of Wendy, but tonight staying close to Stan seems to matter more. The whole evening feels as if it's floating on the surface of a pond, weightless and perfect. Kyle laughs to himself as he catches up with Stan, tugging on the back of his shirt. Stan turns to grin at him.

"You're drunk," he says. "Go eat another piece of that sandwich."

"Cartman's probably finished it by now," Kyle says.

"Probably true." Stan holds him by the arm and guides him through the crowd on the porch. Kyle doesn't feel like a tag-a-long with bad hair anymore. It's more like it was when they were kids, when they couldn't go anywhere without getting asked where the other one was, as if the town had ordered them as a set and wouldn't accept them *a la carte*.

"Hey!" Wendy calls when she sees them. She's standing near the porch railing, a plastic cup in her hand, Jimmy leaning beside her.

"Well, if it isn't the d-dynamic duo," Jimmy says. "We were just talking about you guys."

"Yeah?" Stan says. Kyle just laughs, because that's hilarious, especially the way Jimmy says it. Jimmy is moving to California, too, convinced that he's going to be a famous comedian.

"We were just saying how sad it is," Wendy says. Her eyes flick to Kyle's. "That you guys will be so far apart, for college."

"I should of gone to UCLA," Kyle says, grinning, trying to make a joke of it. Wendy raises her eyebrows.

"Whoa," she says. "Is he trashed?"

"He's never had anything to drink before," Stan says. He steadies Kyle, who pushes him away, laughing. Kyle lands against the porch railing and takes another sip of his drink, half of

it spilling down his chin.

"I'm fine," Kyle says. "I'm great. Hey – hey, Wendy. Guess who's coming on our road trip?"

"I heard about Butters getting grounded for the whole summer," Wendy says, frowning. "It's so absurd. Who did you guys find to take his place?"

“Cartman!” Kyle says, loud enough to get several people looking in their direction. “Cartman, he's coming. That was Stan's big idea.”

“It's not like there's anyone else who would do it on such short notice,” Stan says when Wendy boggles at him. “And he's not – I mean – he's annoying, yeah, but he's not going to ruin the trip.” He looks at Kyle. “I promise.”

“He promises,” Kyle says, looking at Wendy. She laughs.

“I never thought I'd see Kyle drunk,” she says.

“I'm not drunk,” Kyle says. He falls against Stan's side and stares up at him. “Am I?”

“You kind of are, dude. C'mon, let's get some food in you.”

The rest of the party is a blur of snack foods, drink refills and bad music, some of which Kyle actually dances to. Most of the others are drunk, too, and by midnight Kyle is laughing with Clyde like they're old friends, sitting on the front steps with Clyde's heavy arm around his shoulders.

“You remember that time when all the girls said I was the cutest one in school?” Clyde says, slurring, his mouth close to Kyle's ear. “And tha – they said you were the ugliest? 'Member?”

“Yeah,” Kyle says. “Remember how they were just trying to get free shoes from your dad's store? 'Member that part?”

“That was my fucking girlfriend's idea, man,” Clyde says, his face falling. “Tha's the girl I dated all through school, the girl who fucked me over for a pair of shoes.”

“She likes you, though,” Kyle says, patting Clyde's knee. “She just has a funny way of showing it.”

He looks up to see Kenny sauntering up the front walk, and stands with a gleeful, wordless shout, hoisting his drink over his head. Some of it splashes over the side and lands on Clyde's head, but he doesn't seem to notice.

“Are you wasted?” Kenny asks as he comes up the front steps. He looks tired, still wearing his Stop-n-Load polo, a cigarette ashing between his fingers.

“'M not wasted, no, uh-uh,” Kyle says. He stumbles forward, catching himself on Kenny and playing it off like a hug. “Hey, Kenny, guess what. Cartman is coming on our trip. Stan says it'll be be okay.”

“Well, if Stan says so.” Kenny pats Kyle's back and eases free of his embrace.

“Hey, Kenny,” Clyde says, narrowing his eyes at him. “Where were you today, man?”

“Working,” Kenny says. “You know I dropped out.”

“Oh, yeah, right.” Clyde waves his hand through the air, drinks from his beer. “Well, tha's okay. You can still come to my graduation party.”

Kenny stands there staring at Clyde for awhile, moving his tongue over his teeth. Kyle sways on his feet, confused. Are they going to fight? His stomach is starting to do weird things, as if eels have infiltrated it somehow.

“You know what,” Kenny says. “I just remembered something I have to do.”

“No, Kenny!” Kyle says, grabbing his arm, trying to drag him back. “Hey, wait, you just got here! We have to talk about our road trip, right? Come on, have a drink.”

“It's an open bar,” Clyde says. “We all know you like those.”

“Fuck you,” Kenny says, his hands curling into fists. “I just came here to ask Kyle something. I don't want to go to your fucking high school party. High school's over. Who gives a fuck?”

“Yeah, I guess it's been over for you for awhile,” Clyde says, standing. Kenny starts toward him, but Kyle stops him, and Clyde goes back into the house, stumbling.

“Don't listen to that shithead,” Kyle says.

“I wasn't.” Kenny glares at him, then his face softens. “Kyle, look at you, fuck. You're like, drooling on yourself. Where's Stan?”

“Probably with Wendy,” Kyle says. “What'd you want to ask me?”

“What time should I be at Stan's tomorrow?” Kenny asks. “You know,” he says, when Kyle just stares at him, confused. “For the road trip?”

“Oh, yeah! Tomorrow! God, we're leaving tomorrow. Fuck, I can't believe how fast today went. So, um, yeah, nine o'clock. That's when we're leaving. That should get us to Grand Mesa around three, if we stop for lunch.”

“Even drunk, you've got the scheduled memorized,” Kenny says, smirking. “Alright, I'm off.”

“No, man, stay. Let me go find Stan, we can walk to his house, play some video games –”

“I seriously have something I have to do,” Kenny says, backing away again. “Before we leave. But you guys do the video games without me. One last time, right?”

“Right,” Kyle says. All the floaty ease of the Sprite-bubbled vodka seems to leave him at once, and the eels begin wrestling each other in his stomach. He moans and leans against the

railing of Clyde's front stairs, watching Kenny walk off by himself. *Where's Stan?* Even Kenny asks, even now.

Kyle heads back inside, the situation in his stomach rapidly worsening. He crashes into people and mumbles apologies, everyone suddenly unfamiliar, even the kids he's known since pre-school. Nobody but Stan counts, not this late at night, not when he feels this shitty.

He finds Stan in a corner of the kitchen, talking with Wendy. Their voices are too low to make out, and when they spot Kyle staggering toward them they stop talking. Stan frowns and holds out an arm for Kyle to brace himself on.

“Shit,” Stan says. “He's green.”

“Why'd you give him so much to drink?” Wendy asks. Kyle recognizes that tone; they must have been fighting. He wants to flop against Stan, to be carried home.

“Kenny was here,” Kyle says. “I think. Maybe I dreamed that. He said he had to do something. Clyde was mean.”

“I'm taking him home,” Stan says. He puts his hands on Kyle's shoulders, but the room keeps spinning.

“Of course.” Wendy turns away from them abruptly, her hair slinging around her shoulders like weapon. She's angry. Everyone is, suddenly. Kyle wants his bed – no, he wants Stan's, wants to curl up there and hide until the eels in his stomach stop writhing.

“I'll call you tomorrow,” Stan says, but Wendy is already walking away. Stan scoffs and guides Kyle through the crowd, toward the door.

“Who are all these people?” Kyle asks, squinting, the closely-packed bodies all blurring together.

“Our classmates,” Stan says. “Or, anyway. They were. Dude, are you okay?”

“Stan?”

“Yeah?”

“My stomach hurts.”

“Okay.” Stan sighs, helping Kyle down Clyde's front stairs. “When we get home, I'll give you some saltines and ginger ale.”

Kyle moans. *When we get home*. Stan will never say that to him again.

He barely makes it out of Clyde's yard before he gets sick, puking into his neighbor's azalea bushes. Stan kneels down behind him and puts a hand on his back, telling him it will be okay, that he'll feel better when he's gotten it all up. Kyle doesn't believe him, feels like he's going to die, the sky pinwheeling overhead and the smell of regurgitated peach schnapps making

him puke with renewed ferocity. By the time his stomach is empty his legs are barely working, and he feels cold all over.

“C'mon,” Stan says. He squats down in front of Kyle and drapes Kyle's lifeless arms around his shoulders. “Hold on.”

“You can't,” Kyle mumbles, but he clings when Stan hoists him up onto his back, Kyle's legs winding around Stan's waist. Kyle moans at the thought that someone might see them, but it's like everyone who ever mattered is packed into Clyde's house, and they're so far away from the others already, alone together at last.

"Did you really see Kenny?" Stan asks.

"Yeah," Kyle says. He presses his nose to Stan's neck, the smell of Stan's skin settling his stomach somewhat. "I told him - tomorrow. Nine o'clock."

"Nine o'clock," Stan says. He tips his head back to look at the sky. "We're gonna see some pretty great stars, I think. Out in the desert and stuff."

Kyle grins. "You're drunk, too."

"A little. Nowhere near puking, though. Are you going to learn to drink in college?"

"Probably not. Who'd teach me? You won't be there."

They're quiet for the rest of the walk home, dry grass crunching under Stan's sneakers. The town is motionless and dark, like untouched water, crickets singing in the pines. Kyle isn't often out this late. He's usually in bed, either waiting for Stan to show or rolling over to listen to him breathe, the sound of it lulling him back to sleep.

"It's gonna be a great trip," Stan says, as if he's anticipating Kyle's maudlin comment about the end of all comfortable things. Kyle keeps his mouth shut, closes his eyes.

"Am I heavy?" he asks. He feels like he is, despite the fact that he barfed up everything he's eaten today and then some.

"Nope," Stan says, though his voice is strained and he's breathing hard.

"I need to pee."

"You'd better hold it. Piss on me and I'll never forgive you."

"I can wait."

Kyle is half asleep by the time they get to Stan's house, his head resting on Stan's shoulder. He uses the downstairs bathroom and washes his hands, listening to Stan rummaging in the kitchen. When he emerges Stan is eating a Moon Pie. He offers some to Kyle, and Kyle shakes his head.

"No food," he says. "Never again."

"Good," Stan says. He licks chocolate from the corner of his lips. "That'll save us money during the trip."

"Us?" Kyle snorts, still drunk. "Like we have the same, uh. Like we have joint bank accounts or something."

Stan seems wounded by this, and he heads for the stairs. He gets sensitive when he drinks, gets his feelings hurt if Kyle doesn't respond to his drunk texts. Kyle follows him up the stairs, tugging on the tail of his shirt in apology.

"You're gonna trip me," Stan says.

"Maybe I'm trying to. So you can't go away and play football."

Kyle didn't mean to say that, needs to stop talking. Stan just shushes him, and they creep past his mother's bedroom together, into Stan's. Kyle doesn't undress, just falls face first into Stan's bed. The sheets are heavenly, the mattress cloud-like. He hears Stan brushing his teeth, unzipping his jeans. Somewhere in California, in a dorm room that smells like the sweat of forgotten college football heroes, Stan will do these nighttime things and no one will care. Or maybe someone will, that cheerleader with her ear muffs.

"Did you have the talk with Wendy?" Kyle asks when Stan climbs into bed, wearing only boxer shorts.

"Why is everyone calling it that?" Stan squirms under the blankets and Kyle does the same, pushing down his jeans and toeing off his socks, kicking them to the end of the bed.

"You don't have to tell me," Kyle says.

"I did tell you, dude. We're not going to talk it out. We're going to see what happens."

"See what happens," Kyle mumbles, mimicking him. Stan tugs on one of his curls.

"Go to sleep, dude. You're gonna be a zombie in the morning."

"Don't let Cartman talk you into leaving without me," Kyle says, his heavy eyelids falling shut. He tries to wrench them open again, doesn't want the night to be over, but it's useless. His thoughts are already loosening, slipping against each other nonsensically.

"No one could talk me into leaving you behind," Stan says. He tugs on Kyle's hair again, more gently, unrolling a curl and letting it snap back. "Not even him."

Yeah, they could, Kyle thinks, glad that he's too close to sleep to say it out loud. *They did. UCLA did, football did, the west coast did. You're leaving me behind and it's like you don't even know it*.

He dreams of a giant sub sandwich, and lemonade, and Cartman devouring everything. Stan appears and holds Kyle's hand.

"We'll walk to the next town," Stan says. "They'll have food."

"That's what you assholes think!" Cartman says. There's mayo on his face. "I ate all the food in the next town, too!"

"You did not!" Kyle shouts back.

"Yes, I did!" Cartman seems to be growing a foot taller with every word, looming over them, grinning triumphantly. "If you guys want something to eat, you're going to have to beg me to barf it up for you!"

Kyle wakes with a jerk, disturbed by his own subconscious. It's still dark outside, just a little past two in the morning. Stan is fast asleep, turned onto his stomach, his arms pushed up under his pillow. Kyle moves closer to him, still mostly asleep, the dream about having to eat Cartman's puke for sustenance making his stomach lurch uncomfortably. Stan sighs in his sleep. Kyle closes his eyes, listens to the gurgle of Stan's laptop, the push of his breath. He falls asleep trying not to think about the fact that he'll never again wake up from a bad dream and curl in closer to Stan, confident that he's back in the real world, that he's safe. When he sleeps again he dreams that they're older, seeing each other for the first time in years.

Remember the night when you carried me home from Clyde's party? Kyle asks. Stan won't look at him, his eyes focused on something ahead on the horizon. *Remember when I asked if I was heavy?* Kyle knows Stan won't answer, but can't stop asking. *Remember how you said that I wasn't? Was that a lie? Was it true?*

He's not sure why it's important to know this, but if he says the right thing Stan might pick him up like he did that night, might hold him until they have to part again.

Chapter 2

Kyle wakes up when Stan's alarm goes off at six thirty in the morning. There's just a hint of the sunrise in the color of the sky, birds twittering. He feels like something dead that's washed ashore after a storm.

"Are you still sick?" Stan asks. His voice is scratchy but gentle, and Kyle wants to cup his hands around it. Stan touches Kyle's forehead and moans at the heat of his skin. "I shouldn't have let you drink that much."

"Forced me to, more like," Kyle says, mumbling, and Stan snorts. He gets out of bed and starts dressing, packing the last of his stuff. Kyle closes his eyes, doesn't want to leave the bed. If Cartman wasn't joining them he'd be ready to bolt, despite his pounding headache and roiling stomach. As it is, he wants to continue avoiding reality for as long as possible. He yanks the comforter back up and buries himself deeper in the smell of Stan's sheets.

He sleeps more restfully than he did all night, and when he wakes again it's to the sound of Stan's voice. Kyle sits up and blinks in the sunlight through the window, annoyed when he sees that Kenny is in the room, sitting on a beat up old duffel bag and talking to Stan about mosquito repellant.

"Are you finally awake?" Stan asks, turning toward the bed. Kyle moans in response, rubbing his crusted-over eyes. His head still hurts, though less intensely now, and his stomach is growling. His tongue is sour and dry, stuck to the roof of his mouth.

"Kyle's first hangover," Kenny says. He holds up his hands and pretends to take a snapshot.

"Dude, we should take a real picture," Stan says, going for his phone. "I want to take a lot of them on this trip."

"Don't take a fucking picture of me right now," Kyle says. He feels exposed, his jeans and socks crumpled up under Stan's blankets. Kenny and Stan just laugh, Stan hoisting the camera.

"I have to," he says. "For posterity."

Kyle flicks him off, but this only makes Stan laugh harder and take pictures more enthusiastically. When he's done, he slips his phone into his pocket and brings Kyle a bottle of water from his desk.

"I'll get you Advil," he says, patting Kyle's cheek. Kyle swats at him. If it was just the two of them he'd be happy to let Stan nurse him back to health, but he's never liked the knowing way that Kenny smiles when he watches Kyle receive Stan's attentions. He glowers at Kenny when Stan has left the room.

"You're here early," he says.

"No, I'm not." Kenny nods to the digital clock beside Stan's bed. "It's already nine thirty. Cartman's late."

"Shit!" Kyle kicks the blankets away, forgetting to be embarrassed about his lack of pants. "I knew he'd ruin this trip. Let's just leave without him. We'll rob a bank for gas money if we have to."

"Nice boxers," Kenny says as Kyle struggles into his jeans. Kyle looks down at his underwear, his face flushing. His boxers are blue with red polka dots.

"We still have to stop by my house to pick up my stuff," Kyle says. "And I need to change, say goodbye to my parents - dammit, why'd you guys let me sleep so late?"

"Stan said you were sick."

"He was," Stan says, coming back into the room with a bottle of Advil rattling in his hand. "And it's no big deal, Kyle, we'll still get to the campsite way before sundown. Relax."

Kyle takes the Advil, irritable and impatient, watching out the window for any sign of Cartman. He's not sure what he's hoping for. If Cartman doesn't show, they'll have to front the gas money themselves, but if he does, they'll be stuck with his fat ass and loud mouth for six long days.

"There he is," Stan says as they're loading up Stan's Corolla. Cartman's giant truck is roaring down the street, and he parks it on the road out in front of Stan's house. Kyle's stomach lurches with anxiety just at the sight of him. He's huffing as he hoists bag after bag from the backseat of his truck, tossing them onto Stan's lawn.

"What's all that shit?" Stan asks.

"My luggage, dumb ass," Cartman says. "Stan, goddammit." He turns to look at Stan's car, making a face. "I can't believe we have to make this trip in that piece of shit."

"We could take your truck if you want, but you'd have to trade me for good," Stan says. "My car's got to stay with me in California."

"Fat fucking chance," Cartman says. "I'm gonna leave the keys with your mom so mine can pick up my truck later." He heads for the house, pulling up his baggy pants as he goes. He's lost weight recently, following a second major growth spurt, but he'll still be a burdensome presence in Stan's little car.

"You could have just walked, fat ass," Kyle says. "You live like two blocks away."

"Walking is for poor people and hippies!" Cartman shouts back. He lets himself into Stan's house without knocking, and Kyle groans.

"This is gonna be great," he says, giving Stan and then Kenny a doubtful look. Stan gives him a soft punch in the shoulder.

"Cheer up," he says. "In a couple of hours you'll have a post-hangover appetite, and whatever greasy food we stop to eat will taste like the greatest thing you've had in your life."

"Yeah, right," Kyle says, his stomach groaning unhappily at the thought of food. "And look at all that stuff he's packed - what is that? Clothes?"

"Looks like food, mostly," Kenny says, kneeling down to examine Cartman's overstuffed bags. "Double Stuff Oreos, Pop Tarts - ooh, hey, there's a cooler full of chicken salad sandwiches."

"Don't touch my food, Kenny!" Cartman shouts, bursting from the front door of Stan's house and running toward his bags like he's prepared to defend them with his life. "Get your own snacks, you broke asshole!"

"Jesus, you've got enough here for like eight people," Stan says. Kenny is already backing off resentfully, sulking. He used to take jokes about his family's financial situation in stride, before he was the only one not bound for college. Cartman was the only one too stupid or indifferent to figure out that it's not funny anymore. Kyle's stomach whines painfully, and for a moment he's afraid he's going to start puking into the bushes again.

"Let's get going," Stan says. "I'm gonna go say goodbye to my mom. You guys finish loading the car - Cartman, you're not going to be able to bring all these bags."

"Like hell I'm not," Cartman says. "I need all this stuff."

"You need Double Stuff Oreos like a goddamn hole in the head," Kyle says.

"Shut up, Jew! I've lost twenty pounds since Christmas! I can eat whatever I want! Maybe you should leave behind some of your lube and sex toys, or whatever else you packed for your farewell fuck fest with Stan."

Stan walks into the house like he didn't hear that, and Kyle grits his teeth, the backs of his ears going red as he does his best to ignore it, too. The other thing that stopped being funny recently is Cartman's endless insinuations that Stan and Kyle are secret lovers. Stan has never seemed bothered by it, but Kyle feels like he's been eviscerated when Cartman starts in on them about the fact that they still have sleepovers.

"Who's driving first?" Kenny asks as he and Kyle watch Cartman try to stuff all of his bags into Stan's trunk, which is already packed full of everything Stan is taking to college.

"I guess Stan is," Kyle says. "Then me, you, and Cartman, if you guys trust him not to kill us all."

"You're the only one I'm going to kill if you don't shut up," Cartman says. He grunts and lifts his boot to try to kick one of his food bags into place.

"Careful!" Kyle says. "You're going to break Stan's stuff. He's got picture frames in there." One of them contains a picture of Stan and Kyle, which Kyle was heartened to see Stan packing. It's from last year, when they went to a Denver Nuggets game together for Kyle's

birthday. Stan held the camera out and they pressed their cheeks together so they could both fit in the frame. It's slightly off center, one of Stan's favorite pictures because of a woman in the background who is making a hilarious face. It's also probably the happiest Kyle has ever looked in a picture, and he likes to think that factored into Stan's decision to frame it, too. That was one of the best nights of Kyle's life: him and Stan packed tightly into a crowded section of the arena, their shoulders and knees bumping together all night long. It was so loud that they had to speak directly into each other's ears, and Stan's lips touched the rim of Kyle's ear twice. He shivers, remembering it.

"Hello, McFly," Stan says, waving his hand in front of Kyle's face. "We're ready to go."

But Kyle isn't ready. He walks toward the passenger side slowly, his heartbeat drowning out the sound of Kenny and Cartman bickering as they climb into the back together. Stan slides into the driver's seat, and Kyle opens the passenger side door, hot panic moving from the back of his skull and down to the tips of his fingers. He takes a last look at Stan's house. It's not like he'll never be here again. There will be Thanksgiving breaks, winter holidays. Maybe even a sleepover, though he doubts it. They're already too old for that.

"Kyle, dude!" Stan says, leaning over to peer at him through the passenger side window. "I thought you were the one who was in a hurry?"

"No," Kyle says, feeling delirious. "I mean - yeah. Let's go." He gets in, shuts the door, and looks over at Stan, who grins.

"I've got the first song queued up and everything," Stan says. He starts the car, and Kyle clicks his seat belt into place, trying to calm down. They've still got six days. Anything could happen.

Cartman kicks off the trip by making fun of Stan's song choice. Kyle doesn't know the name of the song, though he's heard it on the radio a few times. It's loud, moody but upbeat. Stan rolls his window down, and Kenny and Kyle do the same. Cartman leaves his up, griping about hippie music.

"Here we go," Stan says as they approach the South Park city limits. He whacks Kyle's thigh. "If I take one more step I'll be the farthest from home I've ever been."

"Oh, Jesus, are you quoting *Lord of the Rings*?" Cartman says, snorting. "Stan, goddammit, you're such a fag. And that's bullshit anyway, you've been to, like. Denver and stuff."

"Quit ruining the moment," Kenny says. He pulls his hood up over his head and cinches it tight, shadowing his eyes as he stares out the window. Stan steps on the gas and the car shoots forward, toward the sign that says, *Now Leaving South Park. Don't Stay Gone Too Long!*. Stan sticks his head out of the driver's side window and shouts victoriously as they zoom past it, doing eighty. Kyle grips the sides of his seat, almost sure that he's going to throw up now.

"Good fucking riddance!" Stan screams, laughing as he falls back into his seat. He beams over at Kyle, who manages a queasy smile despite the fact that he feels like he just got

slapped in the face. Stan isn't sad about leaving. He's giddy, gripping the wheel with both hands, still driving fast.

"Like I said," Cartman says, sighing. "Faggotry."

"I'm so done with this town," Stan says. He's still smiling, but he almost looks like his eyes will well up. Ever since his parents divorced, South Park wasn't quite the same for him. He was the first of them to grow up.

"So how long til our first hotel?" Cartman asks, already going for the cooler full of sandwiches.

"Five hours," Stan says. "And it's not a hotel, it's a campsite."

"A what?" Cartman says. He pauses in the midst of unwrapping a sandwich, scowling.

"Camp-site," Stan says, pronouncing it slowly. "We're not staying at any hotels until we get to California. I figured we could get one there, maybe in Long Beach or something, since it'll be our last night."

"Long Beach sounds kinda faggy," Cartman says, his mouth full of chicken salad.

"Stop calling everything faggy," Kenny says. Kyle and Stan exchange a glance. Usually Kenny couldn't give a shit what Cartman says; it's always gone right over his head. He's in a bad mood, which is just as rare as him getting riled by Cartman's stupid comments.

"I just call 'em like I see 'em," Cartman says. "And while we're on the subject of me speaking the truth, this camping shit is for the birds and we need to get a hotel."

"If you want to pay for six nights of staying in hotels, that's fine," Kyle says.

"Dude, no it's not," Stan says. "I like camping."

Kyle says nothing, looking out the window. He's not particularly fond of camping as such, but he is sentimental about the concept, though he knows anything they do now won't live up to the one time he went camping alone with Stan. It was late in the season, a last minute trip; Stan was in a terrible fight with his mother, and Kyle had just gotten his first ever C, on a Spanish oral exam that he'd skipped preparing for in lieu of trying to calm Stan down after the fight. They both needed to get away from South Park, and didn't pack well, not anticipating a snow storm that reached out over the mountains like the icy grip of death. Unable to get back down to town before night fall, they set up camp as best they could and legitimately feared for their lives, huddled together in one sleeping bag for warmth, Kyle's face hidden against Stan's chest as they whispered about what they would regret most if they were found dead in the morning, frozen together in their poorly insulated tent. Secretly, Kyle was exactly where he wanted to be if he had to die: being held tightly by Stan, the two of them talking to keep each other awake, telling each other things they would never tell anyone else. Kyle hadn't seen Stan cry in years, but he started sniffling about how he felt guilty for some of the things he'd said to his mother during their fight. Kyle rubbed his back inside the sleeping bag, telling him she would forgive him, wondering if he should lift his face, kiss

Stan's cheek, maybe his lips, last chance. He didn't, but when they woke in the morning, still alive, still holding on to each other, he was sure they would have their moment at last. Stan moaned and scooted down to ask him if he was okay, their faces just half an inch from being pressed together, and Kyle nodded, waiting to be kissed. All he wanted was something small, a soft peck on the lips that would promise more later, when they had found their way back down the mountain. But Stan yawned, sat up, and said they'd better get started on digging Stan's car out of the snow. Kyle agreed.

The camping stops they've planned on this trip won't be anything like that. It's summer, Cartman won't let them get within a foot of each other without calling them fags, and they're too old to cuddle up around Kenny, even if he does seem more depressed than he was after his father beat the shit out of him. The cornerstone of these camping trips will be Cartman's bitching, maybe with a side of Stan talking about how happy he is that the South Park portion of his life is finally over.

Stan lets Kyle pick some of the music, and Cartman has a field day with this, but Kyle doesn't care. Mentally, he's back on that snow-covered mountain, huddled inside that sleeping bag, Stan's heartbeat the only sound in the world. Every song he picks is about that night, and every song Stan picks is, too, though Kyle knows it's unintentional on his part. He watches the wildflowers pass by along the side of the road, his empty stomach beginning to grumble.

"We should stop for lunch," Stan says. "Unless Cartman wants to share his sandwiches."

"I don't want one of his sandwiches," Kenny says.

"Like hell you don't," Cartman says. "But fuck you guys, get your own food."

They stop for cheeseburgers at a place with outdoor tables, and Stan was right: Kyle feels like he hasn't eaten in weeks, and like he can't get the salty deliciousness of his french fries into his mouth fast enough. He eats two cheeseburgers and a basket full of fries, downing two huge Cokes between bites. Stan is grinning at him as if he's enjoying this.

"You got some color back in your cheeks," Stan says. He lifts his camera and takes a picture.

"Hangovers are for pussies," Cartman says. "I drank like, three bottles of vodka last night and I'm fine."

"Yeah, people who weigh three hundred pounds usually have a pretty high tolerance," Kyle says.

"Sure, unlike people who weigh - how much do you weigh now, Kyle, since you're fully grown?" Cartman asks. "Eighty, ninety pounds?"

"Shut up, fat ass," Kyle says, grumbling. He doesn't want to disclose his weight, a measly 145 on a good day. Even Kenny, who eats ketchup sandwiches on a regular basis, has manged to get bigger than him. Stan is somewhere around 175, six-foot-three, easily in the best shape of the four of them. Kyle has the suggestion of arm muscles, tight but lean, while Stan's are the kind that can throw a football sixty yards.

"I'm surprised you're not hungover," Stan says to Kenny. "You were at the party, right? Kyle said he saw you."

"I only came by to ask what time I should show up today," Kenny says. He's got his face buried in his fries. Stan treated everyone to lunch - even Cartman - as an excuse to pay for Kenny's meal. He won't be able to do that many more times on this trip.

"Where'd you go after you left?" Kyle asks. He has a vague memory of Kenny saying he had an errand to run.

"Nowhere," Kenny says. Kyle looks at Stan again. Kenny is usually a better sport about enjoying himself despite whatever else is going on in his life, but maybe they've been selfish to expect that from him for so long. Even Cartman shovels onion rings into his mouth rather than making some stupid comment.

They kill another twenty minutes at the burger stand, throwing soggy french fries to the parking lot birds, then it's back to the car, Kyle behind the wheel this time. In just a few hours they'll be in Grand Mesa National Forest, and the weather is holding out so far. There's a chance of rain this week at several stops on their route. They only brought one tent, and huddling up inside it would have been no problem if Butters was with them, but with Cartman it would be a squeeze. Kyle thinks of this optimistically as he drives: making room for Cartman might mean being closer to Stan.

Cartman and Kenny both fall asleep after lunch, Kenny with his hood hiding most of his face, his head pressed to the window, and Cartman with his head tipped back over his seat, snoring quietly enough for now. Kyle turns up the music to cover it, and glances over at Stan, who is checking his phone.

"Weird message from Wendy," Stan says.

"Yeah?"

"She's asking how the trip's going so far."

"Uh. That's weird?"

"Yeah." Stan makes a face and puts his phone away without answering. "She doesn't usually check up on me, you know? Not with texts, anyway. And we just left, like. Three hours ago."

"Maybe she misses you," Kyle says. As soon as they separate at LAX, Kyle boarding that one-way flight to Denver along with Cartman and Kenny, he's going to want to text Stan and ask him if he's okay. The difference is that Wendy can get away with it, even if Stan thinks it's weird.

"I doubt she misses me," Stan says, picking at the trim around the passenger side window. "She was pissed at me last night."

"My fault," Kyle says. "Sorry."

"Your fault? No." Stan frowns. "I just - I don't know. It's complicated."

"Sure," Kyle says, not wanting to hear anymore about Wendy. He turns up the music again, and Cartman snorts in his sleep.

"What do you think?" Stan asks.

"About what?"

"Me and Wendy. You've known us all our lives, and we've been together pretty much forever. The last time you gave me an opinion about her it was that 'girls suck ass.'"

"I never said that!" Kyle sits up straighter, panicked. Stan must know about him, on some level; Kyle has never had a real girlfriend. But they don't talk about it, ever.

"You did, too," Stan says, grinning. "Remember? When we built the clubhouse? You were like, eight. I - Kyle. All I mean is that's the last time you told me what you thought about me and Wendy."

"Why the hell do you care what I think?" Kyle asks, agitated now. He's getting hot under his arms and across the back of his neck. They've gone so long without having this conversation, and he's not about to do it with Cartman snoring in the background.

"Why do I care?" Stan scoffs. "'Cause, um, I don't know how to break it to you, but you're my best friend. Your opinion matters like, a lot."

"I think you should stay with her," Kyle says, just because it's not what Stan is expecting. "I mean, Wendy's great. You're not going to find a better girl."

"She is great," Stan says absently, looking out the window. "But. I don't know."

"What?" Kyle says. Hope springs eternal where Stan and Wendy are concerned, even now. Every time they broke up, a barren place in Kyle's chest would flood with fresh water, but it would dry up just as quickly when they got back together.

"Sometimes I feel like we were just an old habit, you know?" Stan says. "Like, we were both afraid to try anything else, because it was easier to just stay together."

Kyle nods, keeping his eyes on the road. It shouldn't sting, because Stan isn't talking about their friendship, but he might as well be. Growing up, they were almost indistinguishable; teachers used to mix up their names in class. As they got older, they both changed a lot, but they clung to each other anyway, because that was what was safe, easy, familiar. At least, that's why Stan clung to Kyle, who was increasingly a liability to his coolness. Kyle only liked Stan more, and differently, for the way he changed.

"So take some time apart," Kyle says, sighing as if he hates to say this. "I don't know what you want me to tell you."

"See, that's the thing," Stan says, whacking Kyle's shoulder. "I feel like you're only telling me what you think I want to hear. Since when do you do that, dude? Tell me the truth."

"The truth is I just don't think about your relationship with Wendy all that much," Kyle says, way too sharply to be convincing. In the back, Kenny wakes with a moan and looks around.

"Oh, shit," he says, mumbling. "I didn't know where the fuck I was for a second."

Stan and Kyle say nothing; apparently the conversation about Wendy is over. Kyle's heart beats fast, and he curses himself; the last thing he wanted on this trip was to piss Stan off. He chews his lip and tries to think about how to apologize.

"Want to stop and take a picture of the sign?" Kyle asks as they're driving into the Grand Mesa National Forest. Stan shrugs.

"I'll take one from the car," he says. "Drive slow, okay?"

"Like you need to tell Grandma Broflovski to drive slow," Kenny says, smirking. Stan grins at him in the rear view mirror.

"I know, right?" he says.

"Fuck you guys," Kyle says, fondly. Stan snaps the picture, and Cartman wakes up with a shout.

"Was that a gun shot?" he asks, panicked.

"Yeah, we're on the run from the cops," Kyle says. "Try to keep up."

"It was my camera, dipshit," Stan says. He turns to take a picture of Cartman, who bleary and confused. Cartman grunts and tries to grab the camera, but Stan evades him easily.

They stop at the park's visitor center to get maps of the campgrounds and brochures about the Forest. Kenny reads from the list of area predators: bears are at the top of the list.

"Good thing I brought my gun," Cartman says. Stan snorts.

"Funny," he says. Cartman just stares at him blankly.

"It's not funny, Stan," he says. "You guys will be kissing my boots when I'm blowing away grizzlies in defense of your lives."

"Wait, are you serious?" Kyle says. "You literally have a gun packed in between bags of Double Stuff Oreos?"

"Yeah," Cartman says, frowning. "What? You guys didn't bring guns?"

"How the fuck did you even get a gun?" Kenny asks.

"It's called being eighteen and having money, Kenny," Cartman says. "You should try it sometime. Oh, wait, you *are* eighteen -"

"You know what, you useless piece of shit?" Kenny says. "I made fifteen thousand dollars last year. How much did you make? Oh, right, you don't even get a fucking allowance, your mom just buys you everything you want -"

"Ooh, fifteen thousand dollars, I'm so impressed!" Cartman says. "My truck cost like, twice that much."

"Your truck that your crack whore mother bought for you? How many dudes did she have to blow for that twenty-five grand?"

Cartman's face turns red, and he does that thing where he seems to grow two feet, jerking his finger at Kenny's chest. "My mom doesn't do crack anymore!" he says, shouting, drawing the attention of a park ranger. "Unlike yours, asshole!"

"Hey, guys, whoa!" Stan steps between them. "Just - calm down, shit."

"Can we get back to the fact that Cartman is carrying a gun around?" Kyle says. "Illegally, since none of us are twenty-one?"

"What does he care if he gets arrested?" Kenny says. "His mom will just blow the chief of police to get him out."

"I'm gonna kick your ass, you white trash son of a bitch!" Cartman says, screaming now.

"Shut the fuck up, dude!" Stan hisses, but it's too late. The park ranger is approaching.

"Everything alright over here, boys?" he asks, frowning.

"Oh, yes, officer," Cartman says, suddenly all cheer and sunshine, the angry color draining from his face as he fakes a smile. "Me and my best friend Kenny were just joking around." He grabs Kenny by the shoulders and yanks him closer. Kenny quirks his mouth, coming up with a grimace of a smile for the ranger.

"Alright," the ranger says. He looks at each of them as if in warning. "You boys planning on camping here tonight?"

"Yep," Stan says. "We were just, uh. Reading up on safety before we head out."

"Heed the warnings about bears," the ranger says. "It's no laughing matter. Make sure any food you have with you is hung from a tree in the proper fashion."

"Great," Kyle mutters under his breath as the ranger heads back to the information desk. "We're gonna take down half the trees in the forest if we try to hang all of Cartman's food."

"We can leave the Oreos and stuff in the car," Stan says. "Bears won't want those. C'mon, let's get out of here before these two geniuses get us arrested."

"He fucking started it," Kenny says. He slams out the door, and Kyle gives Stan a wide-eyed look as Cartman follows Kenny outside, muttering about crack whores under his breath.

"Dude, what the fuck is wrong with Kenny?" Kyle asks.

"What do you think?" Stan says. "He's depressed about all of us leaving him in South Park."

"No, it's something else," Kyle says. "Even when he first dropped out of school, he wasn't this bummed. And I've never seen him this easy to set off."

Stan glances out the door at Kenny and Cartman, who are shoving each other near the car, though they don't seem in danger of getting into an actual fist fight anymore.

"What?" Kyle says. "Do you know something I don't?"

"It's nothing," Stan says. "Or - I'll tell you later. Let's just go."

Annoyed, Kyle follows him out to the car. They drive to the campground in silence, the sun beginning to sink behind the spruce trees. It's still early in the season, and there's no one else setting up camp when they arrive, only some wooden trashcans and a single picnic table there to greet them. Kyle helps Kenny with the tent, wondering what Stan was thinking about telling him. What more could possibly go wrong in Kenny's life?

"Am I the only one who's still freaking out about the fact that Cartman has a gun?" Kyle says. "Or is it just that I'm the one he's most likely to shoot on a whim?"

"I'll find it tonight while he's asleep and make sure it's not loaded," Kenny says. He keeps his eyes on his work, staking down the tent. It's gotten cloudy overhead, and they might need to crawl into this flimsy thing for shelter before the night is over.

"Can I be honest with you?" Kyle says. Kenny looks up.

"Yeah."

"I don't really like camping that much," Kyle says, keeping his voice low. Stan is about twenty feet away, trying to start a fire so they can cook the bacon they brought for BLTs. Cartman is watching, gnawing beef jerky while he tells Stan that he's doing it wrong.

"Sorry," Kenny says. "If I had any money to spare I guess we could have gotten motel rooms."

"Dude - no! That's not what I meant. It's Stan, this is his thing. He's all into nature and shit. But I hate not having running water."

"I'm used to it," Kenny says. He smirks, and Kyle forces a laugh. "Anything else you want to tell me?" Kenny asks.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

Kenny shakes his head. "Forget it. Here, you want some of this?" He reaches into the pocket of his hoodie and pulls out a flask.

"*Fuck* no," Kyle says, waving both hands at the thing. "I'm done with drinking. I'm just starting to feel normal again."

"Suit yourself." Kenny throws back a few gulps. "I got plenty more where this came from if you change your mind in a few days. I figured this was the one way I could contribute." He starts to walk off, but Kyle catches his arm.

"Dude," Kyle says. He fidgets, isn't sure if he's being a gaywad. If he is, Kenny will forgive him. "That's not all you contribute. You're our friend. I'm really glad you're here."

"Are you?" Kenny drinks from the flask again. "You don't wish it was just you and Stan?"

"No way, dude." Kyle turns away before Kenny can see his ears turn red. "I'm gonna go find more firewood," he says, heading for the trees.

"Wait up." Kenny groans and jogs after him. "Don't wander off by yourself."

"I'm fine," Kyle says, but he lets Kenny trail behind him, both of them collecting kindling. In a way, Kyle is glad that it's not just him and Stan on this trip. It would be excruciating, in a way, all those almost-there moments, no reason to cuddle up together in the same sleeping bag. Unless of course a bear was stalking them. He stops walking for a moment and listens. The woods are eerily quiet as the sun sinks lower.

"I heard you guys talking in the car," Kenny says, startling Kyle.

"Yeah?"

"About Wendy." Kenny stares at him like his reason for bringing this up should be obvious. Kyle raises his eyebrows.

"Okay," he says. "So?"

Kenny narrows his eyes a little, not unkindly, just as if he's studying Kyle. He tucks the kindling he's collected under his arm and pulls the hood of his sweatshirt up.

"They're not going to stay together," Kenny says.

"You don't think so?" Kyle starts walking back toward the camp, away from this conversation.

"They're not right for each other," Kenny says. Kyle laughs.

"Whatever you say."

"You really have no opinion about it?"

"I don't see why everyone thinks I should. Did Stan ask you to say this?"

"No." Kenny shakes his head and drinks from his flask again. "You know what, Kyle, forget it."

"Good. Done. Forgotten. Fuck! What next? Cartman is going to start grilling me about Stan and Wendy's future?"

"You're a dumb ass," Kenny says. Kyle kicks pine straw at him, furious. It's not the first time Kenny has attempted to get confrontational with him while buzzed.

"You are," Kyle says.

"Nice comeback."

"Yeah, I thought so."

Back at camp, Stan has the fire going, and he's sitting beside it with a plastic cutting board in his lap, slicing tomatoes for the sandwiches. Cartman is stretched out on what appears to be Kyle's sleeping bag, playing games on his phone.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Kyle asks, walking over to Cartman, who doesn't look up.

"Angry Birds," Cartman says.

"I mean on my sleeping bag, fat ass. Get off."

"No can do, Kyle. None of you assholes told me we'd be camping, so I didn't bring a sleeping bag. This was the first one I saw, so I claimed it. Sucks for you."

"I'm serious, Cartman, get off!" Kyle says, ready to pitch the whole armload of kindling at him. "You can sleep in the tent if you don't have a bag."

"Oh, I'll be sleeping in the tent," Cartman says. "On top of this sleeping bag."

"No, you won't, you piece of shit!"

"Hey, Kyle," Stan says. He looks tired when Kyle turns to him, his face still pinched with rage. "C'mere, dude. Help me with lettuce."

"Stan! He -"

"I know, man, but just c'mere. I'm getting a headache."

"Oh, I guess that's me and Kenny's fault," Kyle says, huffing as he walks to Stan. He puts the kindling down and sits beside him, shoulders hunched. "Totally a coincidence that we're both pissed at Cartman."

"I know whose fault it is," Stan says, softly enough to keep this from Cartman. "But he's just trying to rile you. I have a blanket - I can unzip my bag and we can both sleep on it, under the blanket."

Kyle sighs, pretending not to be elated by this development. "Fine. But he might as well keep that bag. He's going to fill it with farts that will haunt it forever."

"Probably true," Stan says. He pats Kyle's back and hands him the head of lettuce that he packed for their first night's meal. Kyle takes it and begins tearing it into neat segments, setting it on the cutting board beside the tomatoes. His fury evaporates quickly. Cartman has just done him a tremendous favor, and it's worth the price of a new sleeping bag. Kyle will be able to sleep with Stan for the rest of the trip, and Cartman won't even be able to give them shit about it, since he's the one who necessitated the situation.

Stan and Kyle cook the bacon and assemble the sandwiches while Kenny gets drunk and Cartman curses at Angry Birds. Normally Kyle would complain about having to do all the work, but it's kind of cozy, passing ingredients to Stan, making a meal together. Night falls and bugs begin to sing. Kenny sprays Kyle and Stan with mosquito repellent before they start eating.

"Let me have some of that," Cartman says, lumbering over to the campfire with a bottle of Mountain Dew that he got from one of his bags.

"Nope," Kenny says.

"Fuck you, Kenny, hurry up and spray me!" Cartman says. He slaps at a mosquito on his arm. "They're eating me alive."

"I only brought enough for me, Kyle, Stan, and Butters," Kenny says. "And you're about four times the size of Butters. We'd run out too fast if I used it on your fat ass."

Stan is making a slashing motion across his throat, but Kenny is dancing away from Cartman as he tries to grab the repellent, and he doesn't notice.

"Butters?" Cartman says. "What does that gaywad have to do with anything?"

"He was supposed to come on this trip with us," Kenny says. Stan groans under his breath, but Kyle is glad to see Cartman's bubble burst. "You seriously thought you were our first choice?"

Cartman actually seems to be at a loss for a moment. Kyle manages half a second of pity for him.

"So, what, Butters decided he didn't want to get tag teamed by the three of you after all?" Cartman says. Stan laughs and shakes his head, and Kyle rolls his eyes. Kenny looks murderous.

"He got grounded," Kenny says. "So now we're stuck with you."

"Well, I might not give as many blow jobs as Butters," Cartman says. "But you guys can blow each other if you're that desperate. Now give me that bug spray."

To Kyle's surprise, Kenny does give it to him, pitching the can at him like a fast ball. Cartman catches it, and Kenny storms off toward the woods.

"Hey, what the fuck?" Stan says. "Kenny? Come eat your sandwich."

"I need a minute," Kenny shouts back. Stan curses and scrambles up, handing his sandwich to Kyle.

"Watch that for me," he says. "The last thing I need today is Kenny getting lost and eaten by bears."

"What about you?" Kyle asks as Stan jogs after Kenny. "At least take a flashlight!"

"I'll be right back!" Stan shouts back, and he's gone. Kyle sits with his mouth hanging open and his sandwich in his lap, coughing when the mist from Cartman's spray-down wafts over toward the fire.

"Be careful with that shit!" Kyle says. "It's probably flammable."

"No more flammable than your ginger ass pubes," Cartman says. "Better get them away from that fire."

"Don't talk about my pubes!" Kyle cranes his neck, trying to see Stan or Kenny through the darkness, but there's no sign of them, and he can't hear their footsteps anymore.

"Man, they're total bear food," Cartman says. He walks over and helps himself to two sandwiches. "You should consider yourself lucky, Jew. You're with the only person who came prepared." He pats his pocket, and Kyle gapes at the gun-shaped bulge.

"Get that thing away from me," Kyle says, standing. "It had better not be loaded."

"Of course it's loaded! What the hell good would it do us if it wasn't?"

Kyle groans, his appetite disappearing. He eats his sandwich anyway, because Stan helped him make it, and stares at the woods, waiting to hear any sign of Kenny and Stan's approach. There's nothing, just some hooting in the distance, and the menacing sound of the bugs as they really get going.

"Hey, fire crotch," Cartman says. "Let me ask you something."

"No."

"How are you going to survive without Stan changing your diapers? At worst, he's getting eaten by a bear right now, and at best, he's going to be brain dead after a couple of years of getting mowed over on the football field, and he'll be too far away to carry your schoolbooks for you, anyway -"

"Shut up," Kyle says, trying to channel Stan's advice: *He's just trying to rile you, don't let him get to you*.

"No, really, I'm wondering," Cartman says. "You guys are like, the definition of co-dependent. How come you're not going to the same school?"

"'Cause I got a scholarship to Penn State, and Stan got a scholarship to UCLA. It's not that hard to figure out."

"Yeah. Too bad you're such a weakling and Stan's such a dumb jock. Otherwise you could have gotten the same kind of scholarship."

"You know what, Cartman? Go ahead and say whatever you want. I know you're upset that we'd rather have Butters here than you. Stan didn't want Kenny to tell you, but you've been riding Kenny so much that I can't really blame him. Take my sleeping bag, eat all the food - whatever. I'm going to go lie in the tent and think about how much better this trip would have been if Butters had come instead of you."

"Eww, don't tell me your sexual fantasies about Butters coming!" Cartman says. Kyle scoffs and grabs Stan's sleeping bag, pillow, and blanket before crawling into the tent. He unzips the bag and flattens it out so that it takes up most of the floor space inside the tent. If Cartman tries to come in, Kyle will fight to the death to keep him out. Let him sit out there and think about how paltry his defenses are in the face of the truth: nobody wants him here.

The temperature outside drops, and Kyle pulls the blanket over himself, shivering as he waits to hear Kenny and Stan returning. It feels like hours have passed since they left, but when he checks his phone he sees that it's only been twenty minutes. His phone's battery is almost dead. If his phone dies, he'll be totally at Cartman's mercy, and Cartman probably wouldn't consent to call the park ranger about Stan and Kenny's disappearance until morning, just to spite Kyle. But, no - they haven't disappeared. Kenny is just blowing off steam, and Stan is keeping him company. They're safe. They're fine.

Kyle wakes from a nightmare about blood and guts and bears, jerking onto his back and swatting at whatever is trying to attack him. It's Stan. He catches Kyle's hands and pins them to the sleeping bag.

"Dude, it's okay!" he says, whispering. "It's just me."

"Stan!" Too delirious and distressed to know what he's doing, Kyle sits up and throws his arm around Stan's neck. Stan laughs and hugs him back.

"Were you having a bad dream?" he asks. Kyle looks around, glad to see that they're the only ones in the tent. He should let go of Stan anyway. He does, sitting back.

"Yeah," he says. "I just - how long were you gone?"

"I don't know, awhile." Stan sighs. "Kenny's kind of a mess. He needed to talk."

"Where is he?"

"Sleeping in the car, in the backseat. He's okay, he just got a little drunk, and, you know, he's going through some stuff."

"Some stuff? Jesus, what happened to your arm?" Kyle grabs Stan's wrist and pulls his arm up closer to his face. There's a gash just under the joint of his elbow, blood streaking from it, dripping onto Stan's jeans. Vague images from Kyle's dream streak through his mind, jolting his stomach.

"It's nothing," Stan says. "A tree branch scratched me. I got the first aid kit from the car - will you help me?"

They sit Indian-style, knees touching. Kyle cleans Stan's cut, rubs it with antibacterial ointment and bandages it. Doing so feels good, like an antidote to his bad dreams. Stan is quiet, watching Kyle work. He seems exhausted, and Kyle wonders if being with the three of them feels like babysitting to him.

"There," Kyle says when he's finished. "Now. First of all - where is Cartman, and, more importantly, where is Cartman's loaded gun?"

"He was conked out in your sleeping when we got back," Stan says. "Kenny looked for the gun in his stuff, but he couldn't find it."

"Yeah, that's 'cause he has it on him, in his pocket."

"Shit." Stan sighs, and Kyle scoots back onto the sleeping bag, hoping Stan will follow his lead. He does, resting his head on the other half of the pillow, facing Kyle. "Some first day," he says.

"I think it will get better." Kyle doesn't want to be part of the reason this trip got ruined, even if it means pretending that Cartman isn't already driving him crazy. "So. What's going on with Kenny, exactly?"

"Dude, I just spent the past hour talking about that shit," Stan says. "I'll tell you tomorrow. Can we talking about something else before bed?"

"Like what?" Kyle hopes he doesn't want to reintroduce the topic of Wendy.

"You know what I was thinking about today?" Stan asks, grinning.

"What?"

"That time when your family moved to San Francisco, and I wrote that song about hybrid cars -"

"Oh, God!" Kyle laughs, curling his knees up toward his chest. "I had that song in my head for, like. Years." Kyle remembers returning to town, the way Stan ran to him and threw his arms around him. Even then, nine years old and still a long way from sorting out his feelings, Kyle didn't want to let him go.

"I don't even remember the lyrics," Stan says. "Except for, like: 'C'mon, people now, people now!'"

"Don't, you'll get it in my head!"

"People now, people now, people now!"

Kyle laughs harder, pushing at Stan to get him to shut up, but it's feeble and insincere, just an excuse to get Stan to tackle him. Kyle rolls away, curling into a ball and laughing until tears

sting the corners of his eyes. Stan is singing the song right in his ear, cracking up.

"That was the height of my musical career," Stan says.

"Whatever, dude. Guitar Hero was more impressive."

"I just had to get you back," Stan says, draining the amusement from Kyle in an instant, though his smile is still frozen on his face. Stan is behind him, propped up on his elbow, his hand clamped around Kyle's side. "Like, being away from you wasn't even an option. I wasn't even going to entertain it."

"You were just a kid," Kyle says. His heartbeat has already relocated to the hollow his throat, so heavy that it hurts.

"Yeah, but it worked. Sort of. What do I have to do now? I can't believe we're not going to the same school. I mean. I always thought we would."

Kyle doesn't say anything. He's been afraid to bring this up ever since he got his acceptance letter. He can't go anywhere that won't offer him a full scholarship, because he'd be rejected for even a five hundred dollar loan. He ruined his credit when he was nine years old, trying to prove a point about the economy to the idiots in South Park. He actually applied to UCLA as soon as Stan started seriously considering playing for their team, but Stan doesn't know that. Kyle got accepted, too, but with no scholarship.

"It'll be okay," Kyle says. Stan's hand slides off of him, and Kyle closes his eyes. It felt true when Stan was still touching him: *it'll be okay*.

"I guess," Stan says. "What if everyone at UCLA is a huge douche?"

"They won't be."

"Well. What if everyone at Penn State is? I mean. I bet most of them will be."

Kyle grins and rolls onto his back. Stan looks serious, like he's really worried about this, or hoping that it will be true, that Kyle will find everyone else in the world lacking in comparison. It's not such a stretch to imagine that he might; he certainly has so far.

"Come play football for Penn State," he says.

"It's not that easy. They didn't recruit me. I can't just, like. Show up to their camp."

"Why not? Steal someone else's locker. Assume the identity of a Penn State player. I'll help."

"You sound like Cartman."

"Dude!"

Stan grins. "I meant that in the best way."

Kyle makes a disapproving sound and pretends to send a punch toward Stan's face, pressing his knuckles to his cheek in slow motion. It's an old habit. He doesn't know what he'll do without the feeling of Stan's cheek against his fist, the way Stan smiles down at him when he does this. He's going to keep his cool, isn't going to let Stan get him worked up or hopeful, but he really doesn't know what the fuck he's going to do.

"That was my only idea," Kyle says. "The identity stealing one. Your turn."

"My turn? Come to UCLA. They'd accept you."

"It's too late to apply." Kyle doesn't want to admit that the only reason he's not following Stan to the ends of the earth is the loan thing. Stan must have forgotten about it. Kyle certainly did, until he got his loan applications rejected.

For a moment Stan looks like he has more to say, then he just settles down onto the sleeping bag, folding his arms behind his head and staring at the roof of the tent. Kyle arranges the blanket over both of them, not wanting to hog it. He rolls onto his side and sneaks a few nervous glances at Stan before closing his eyes and pretending to sleep.

"C'mon, people now, people now," Stan says, singing under his breath. Kyle opens his eyes, grinning, but Stan is still just staring into space, looking grave. Kyle closes his eyes again.

Sometime around dawn it starts raining, just lightly, but enough to send Cartman harrumphing into the tent, dragging Kyle's sleeping bag with him.

"Fags to the left," he says, pushing Stan out of the way. Stan lands on Kyle, scowling over his shoulder at Cartman and herding Kyle toward the wall of the tent.

"Camping is fucking gay," Cartman says. He slumps over in a heap inside Kyle's sleeping bag and immediately begins snoring. Stan sighs and settles back down onto the pillow, still pressed against Kyle with Cartman taking up most of the room inside the tent. Kyle pretends to be asleep. He can feel Stan's breath on the back of his neck, and tries mightily not to allow this to make him hard. Eventually he gives in, lets it happen. The wet sound of Cartman's snoring keeps it from becoming a full blown, needful boner, and when he wakes up again, despite the fact that Stan's face is pressed fully to his neck now, he's soft.

There's some noise from outside the tent, and the rain has stopped. Stan moans when Kyle sits up to check the location of Cartman. He's still in Kyle's sleeping bag, no longer snoring but pretty clearly asleep. A clang from out near the fire pit makes Kyle glad for a moment that Cartman has a gun. He was too irritated by him last night to remember to clean up, and bears probably respond pretty enthusiastically to the smell of bacon grease.

It's not a bear rummaging around their campsite, it's Kenny. He's got his hood pulled up and he's poking through Cartman's food bags, doing a pretty good imitation of a raccoon. Kyle leaves the tent, shivering and wanting to get back under the blanket with Stan, but unwilling to endure any comments about it from Cartman when he wakes.

"Hey, man," Kyle says, and Kenny leaps away from Cartman's bags, cursing. "Whoa, sorry. Did you sleep okay?"

"I wasn't stealing food," Kenny says, red-faced. "I just - I was looking for that gun. He's the last person who should have one."

"Yeah, I agree. Calm down, dude. And don't bother looking in there. He's got it in his pants pocket."

"Fuck! Of course." Kenny pushes his hood down. He's got bags under his eyes, and Kyle doesn't need to ask again if he slept well.

"You're hungover?" Kyle says. Kenny nods. Kyle considers asking him about what he and Stan talked about last night. If he does, Kenny might ask Kyle for his opinion about Stan and Wendy again. In a way, they've always been closer than Kenny and Stan, better able to read each other, but for that reason they've always kept their guard up, afraid to give away too much.

"Want food?" Kyle asks, and he's surprised when Kenny nods. Kyle looks at the fire, but restarting one is hopeless; the wood is soggy from the rain. He goes to the car, where Stan stowed their communal food supplies, and takes out two slices of white bread for Kenny.

"Thanks," Kenny says. He seems irritated by the gesture, and observes the bread for a few seconds before taking a bite. In middle school, Kyle and Stan would take turns bringing extra food for him to eat at lunch. In high school, he told them to stop doing it.

"I'm ready to get the hell out of here," Kyle says. The forest is dripping after the rain, and seems menacing. "I'm gonna wake those guys up if you want to start packing."

"Sounds good," Kenny says. "Where are we headed next?"

Kyle sighs. "Another fucking National Forest, dude."

"Seriously? But we're stopping in Vegas, right?"

"Yeah, but Stan wants to camp in the Lake Mead National Recreation Area while we're there."

"Whatever," Kenny says. "As long as I can hit casinos all night long. You guys can just come pick me up whenever you're done bird watching. I saved a thousand bucks for this."

"A thousand bucks? For gambling?"

"Yeah. What other chance do I have? I've been hitting the Indian casinos at home on the weekends, but that's small time. All I need is, like, twenty thousand bucks and I can give my sister enough of a cushion to live off of after I'm gone."

"Gone?" Kyle doesn't like this, or the look in Kenny's eyes as he talks about it. "Where will you go?"

Kenny shrugs. "Anywhere but South Park."

"And do what?"

"I don't know. Dig ditches? Who gives a fuck? I just don't want to be there after everyone else has gone. Just me and Timmy, right? Fuck that."

Kyle could lecture him about the risks of gambling and the low chance of breaking even in Vegas, let alone making twenty thousand dollars. He could tell him that it won't be that lonely in South Park, that they'll keep in touch, hang out on holidays, make him feel like he's still part of the crowd. He can't bring himself to say any of this, so he just stands on his tiptoes and hugs him. Kenny laughs and pats Kyle's back.

"You know, Broflovksi," he says. "You're like a mother to me."

"*What*?"

"Only in the sense that Stan is like a father." Kenny winks, and Kyle punches him. Behind them, the front flap of the tent unzips, and Stan comes stumbling out into the clearing, rubbing his eyes. Kyle prays that Kenny will shut his stupid mouth, and he does, winking again before heading toward the car.

"Whoa," Stan says, coming to stand beside Kyle. "Cartman's food got all wet."

"We're lucky the rotting chicken salad didn't attract bears," Kyle says. "Ready to get the fuck out of here?"

"Sure," Stan says. He yawns. "Let's pack up."

"Can we leave Cartman here?"

"No, Kyle."

When Cartman emerges from the tent he's in a foul mood, and he kicks the remains of food bags around the clearing, refusing to clean them up. Stan does it for him, sighing heavily, unable to leave his beloved environment in such a state. Kyle helps, and it's an unpleasant job, especially with Cartman and Kenny lounging in the car while they do it.

"Kenny told me about his grand plan," Kyle says. "I guess that's what you guys talked about last night?"

"I guess," Stan says. "If you want to call it a plan."

"It's so stupid, but I can't really blame him. If I was him I guess I would be desperate and naive, too."

"I don't think he's desperate." Stan pauses in his trash collecting and frowns. "Maybe a little naive, but in a good way."

"In a good way? Really, Stan? You think he's depressed now, how do you think he's going to feel when he realizes he's not leaving Vegas with twenty thousand dollars?"

"Wait, what?" Stan's frown deepens. "Twenty-thousand dollars? Vegas?"

"Are we not talking about the same thing?" Kyle asks, confused. He jumps when a blaring sound rings out from the other side of the clearing, certain for a moment that it's some sort of prehistoric forest creature that wants to eat them. It's just Cartman, sitting in the driver's seat, laying on the horn.

"Hurry up, buttholes!" he shouts. "I didn't get any breakfast and it's probably like an hour to the nearest IHOP!"

"I'll get the rest of this," Stan says, taking the soggy trash from Kyle.

"Wait," Kyle says. "So, if I'm talking about Kenny's grand plan to get rich in Vegas, what the fuck are you talking about?"

"Kenny has bigger problems than dumb get rich quick schemes," Stan says. "I'll tell you tonight."

"Stan!"

"It's not the kind of thing I can get into quickly! Let's go before Cartman drives off without us."

Kyle rides in back with Stan, dreaming of a hot shower as they drive down the mountain, toward the highway. Cartman's taste in music is an alarming mix of cheesy 90's hip-hop and twangy country, and Kyle deeply regrets packing his mp3 player into the trunk before leaving the forest, because Cartman refuses to pull over and give him access to it. Stan wants to stop at the Colorado National Monument before they cross the state line, but Cartman blasts past it, toward a Denny's that he's located with his smart phone. By the time they get there Kyle is hungry for a hot meal, too, and secretly glad that they didn't blow thirty minutes letting Stan take pictures of the National Monument. He heads for the bathroom while the others wait for a table. He cleans his hands thoroughly, and scrubs his underarms and feet as best he can with cheap soap and paper towels before slipping into a stall to change into fresh underwear and socks.

"Well, don't you smell dainty," Cartman says when Kyle finds them in the dining room, Stan patting the booth beside him like it's a seat he saved for Kyle on the school bus.

"Sorry I don't relish the idea of shoveling germs into my mouth," Kyle says.

"You're such a weirdo," Stan says. "A few germs are good for the digestive system."

"Keep telling yourself that, dude."

"Case in point," Stan says. "Kenny never gets sick."

"I highly recommend living in filth," Kenny says, nodding. Kyle laughs uncertainly, though Kenny's malaise seems to have lifted somewhat. He orders only coffee, bacon and hash browns when the waitress comes. Kyle gets French toast, Stan orders chocolate chip pancakes with a side of turkey sausage, and Cartman asks for the Lumberjack Plate with

Belgian waffles on the side. He rubs his hands together when his plates arrive, the waffles piled high with whipped cream.

"I gotta get a picture of this," Stan says, digging out his camera. Cartman hams it up for him, maybe unintentionally, taking over-sized bites and chewing with his mouth open. Kyle tries to concentrate on his French toast, not wanting to lose his appetite, but Cartman is a noisy eater and hard to ignore in general.

"Oh, God," Cartman says, whipped cream at the corner of his lips. "It's like I'm back in civilization."

"Speaking of that," Kyle says. "You didn't bring that g-u-n in here, did you?"

"Um, yes." Cartman leans over the table and narrows his eyes. "Kyle, this is a *highway Denny's*. This isn't some harmless neighborhood Denny's with balloons on the hostess stand. The sick sons of bitches who patronize highway eateries are way more dangerous than any bear you're going to cross paths with, I guarantee it."

"Dude, you are so South Park," Stan says. "Just because it's not a small town where everybody knows your dick size doesn't mean it's dangerous."

Kyle looks around. Some of the other tables are filled with what appear to be weary travelers, but there are some crusty looking guys in denim vests and dark glasses huddled over coffee cups in the back. He scoots closer to Stan. His mother always told him that city life was *a complete disgrace!* and that she'd moved him to South Park when he was a toddler so that he wouldn't grow up to be a gang member. He's glad Penn State is a good three hours from Philadelphia.

"Is UCLA close to the city?" he asks Stan.

"Yep," Stan says. "I can't wait. Real Chinese food, dude, not just vats full of gloppy meat from City Wok."

"Whatever," Kenny says. "City Wok is fucking delicious."

Kyle agrees, but doesn't say so. He scrapes the syrup from his plate and licks his fork. Stan isn't only going to turn into a college football stud once he moves out west, he's going to become cultured, worldly, too cool for South Park cuisine. He'll probably end up vegan.

"First of all," Cartman says. He pats his mouth clean with a napkin. "Los Angeles is like the third most faggy city in the world, after Portland and San Francisco, and second of all, yes, Kenny, you are correct. City Wok is the best Chinese food in the world, and I'm including the shit that actually comes from China."

"Like you'd know," Stan says, laughing. The waitress brings the check, and Stan grabs it before Kyle can ask to have it split four ways. "I'll get this," he says.

"Fine," Kenny says, going for his wallet. "We'll all give you cash."

"I don't have cash," Cartman says. "And thank you, Stan, how generous."

"You shouldn't be paying for Cartman's food, dude," Kyle says, though he knows Stan is only doing so for Kenny's sake. "You're gonna be out there for three months before your scholarship money kicks in."

"Two and a half months," Stan says. "Relax, it's okay."

Kenny ends up leaving the tip in cash, and he forces Stan to accept two dollars in addition to this. Now that he's been fed, Cartman has no interest in driving, and he dumps himself in the passenger seat, pushing it all the way back onto Kyle's legs. Stan joins Kyle in the back while Kenny drives, and he lets Kyle pull his feet up onto the seat, the top of his head resting against Stan's leg. Stan takes a picture of him, and Kyle makes a face.

"Don't," he says.

"Why not?" Stay says. "It's our last summer. Don't you want to remember it?"

"I don't need to remember what I looked like at ten in the morning after eating at Denny's," Kyle says. He closes his eyes and folds his hands over his stomach. It's true, he's never going to want to see that picture, but the fact that Stan might look at it when he's sitting alone in his dorm room, thinking about this moment, makes him feel like he's floating over the highway. Kenny's music is surprisingly mellow, and Cartman seems content to be quiet now that he's stuffed himself.

"Here we go," Kenny says.

"What?" Stan says.

"Look. Utah border."

"Goodbye, Colorado," Stan says, and Kyle isn't floating anymore, he's falling in a westerly direction. He's got his safety net for now, Stan's thigh for a pillow, but it won't be there when he crashes to earth.

Chapter 3

After breakfast, it's another five hours to their next stop, which is the Fishlake National Forest. Stan wants to camp by the lake and rent fishing poles, catch their dinner and show Kyle how to gut a fish. Kyle really wants a shower, and dreams about taking one while he naps in the backseat. When he wakes up his head is more firmly in Stan's lap than he realized, and he allows himself to enjoy it for a few groggy seconds before he sits up. Kenny is driving while Cartman fools with the radio.

"Turn that down," Stan says. "Kyle is trying to sleep."

"It's okay, I'm up," Kyle says. He's still closer to Stan than he should be, in the middle seat. Cartman's seat is pushed back as far as possible, eliminating all leg room.

"Why the hell are you so tired?" Cartman asks, turning to look at Kyle. "Did Stan ride you too hard before I broke up your little tent party?"

"Shut up," Kyle says. He rubs the sleep from his eyes and yawns. "Where are we?"

"Creepy compound country," Kenny says. "I need to stop for gas soon, so that should be interesting."

"Compounds?" Kyle says. "What, like those fringe Mormon cults?"

"Polygamists," Cartman says. "So get your cameras ready."

"What do you think you're gonna see?" Stan asks. "Orgies? Don't take any pictures, I don't want these people, like, retaliating."

"Good call," Cartman says. "We could end up strapped to their dinner tables, eaten alive."

"Sick." Kyle kicks the back of his seat. "Shut up. They're not *cannibals*."

"And you know that how, Kyle? There are no recorded interactions with some of these, shall we say, *tribes* and decent humanity. There's no telling what sort of strange customs go on in their underground bunkers."

Kyle scoffs and looks out Stan's window, settling his shoulder against Stan's. Empty highway terrain like the kind they're driving through makes him a little nervous. Cartman inventing bullshit about roadside cannibals doesn't help.

"You hungry?" Stan asks, nudging Kyle. He nods.

"We don't have to stop, though," he says. "Not that there's anyplace out here to stop."

"Here," Stan says. He reaches over Kyle, for a bag that's tumbled to the floorboard behind Cartman's seat, and digs out a packet of pretzels. They split it, watching the blank desert

scenery pass by outside the car, and by the time the pretzels are gone Kyle's mouth is dry and dusty. He wants to put his head on Stan's shoulder and sleep again.

"Gas station in five miles," Kenny says as they pass a banged up sign that informs them of this. "I'll have to stop there."

"I'll cover you while you're filling up," Cartman says.

"Cover me? What, with the gun? I don't think the crazy cultists are going to come out of the convenience store shooting."

"You never know with these people."

"Oh, great," Kyle says. "We're all gonna end up in some backwoods jail after Cartman opens fire on innocent hillbillies."

"No such thing as an innocent hillbilly," Cartman says. "Those people are born deranged."

"You'd know," Stan says. Kyle laughs and leans against him, partly just to see how he'll respond. He's been so physical for the past few days. Stan rests his elbow on Kyle's leg, and stale hope flares up through Kyle's chest.

"Heard from Wendy again?" he asks.

"Yeah, weirdly," Stan says. "She asked me how I was doing."

"Whoa. I'll alert the media."

"It's weird for Wendy, trust me. She usually only gets in contact with me if she actually has something to say. Like, she got her grades in, or she needs to know if I'm free on Friday. That sort of stuff."

"Maybe it's just hitting her hard that you've left town," Kyle says. "It's not like you're just going on vacation or something. She's still there, and you're gone."

"Dude, fine, but she's moving to California, too."

"Yeah, about six hours north of you. It's not gonna be the same."

Kenny's music is too quiet, and Kyle feels awkward, is letting himself get worked up. When Stan's sighs, Kyle can feel it, Stan's shoulder lifting and settling against his.

"Well," he says. "Wendy will just, um. She'll get used to it. It's not like we won't talk."

"Right, but she's your girlfriend." Kyle can't seem to get himself to shut up. "She's used to having you, like. Near to her. It's not the same to just talk. I mean, aren't you worried about this? Don't you think about this shit?"

Kenny starts fucking with the radio, turning up the volume and scrolling through static-filled stations. Stan is looking at Kyle, and Kyle is staring straight ahead, at the windshield. The

exit that leads to the gas station is approaching.

"Of course I think about it," Stan says, softly.

"Let me break it down for you, Kyle," Cartman says. "Wendy is what you call a 'high maintenance bitch.'"

"She's not a bitch," Stan says. "Shut up."

"I mean in the sense of show dogs here," Cartman says. "Wendy's well bred, I'll give her that. She'd probably produce some serious champions. But in the meantime, she's a lot of work. Like, one of those dogs that has to have its fur brushed eighty-five times a day or it gets tangled up in its own hair and can't walk."

"What the *fuck* are you talking about?" Kyle asks, agitated. He was having something close to a real conversation with Stan, and while it was kind of a relief when Kenny broke the silence by messing with the radio, this is taking everything totally off the rails.

"Stay with me here, Kyle," Cartman says. "What Stan is looking for, in terms of college poon, are the more common but easier to maintain breeds. He's looking to fuck like, beagles for awhile. Hot beagles, but beagles all the same. Maybe he'll come back and marry Wendy, who would be, like, a *bichon frise* in this scenario, I guess -"

"Okay, stop talking," Kyle says. "Or talk about shooting cannibal hillbillies. Just stop trying to make sense out of this goddamn metaphor, because it's not going to happen."

"Oh, sorry, I didn't realize you had dibs on awkward metaphors about Wendy," Cartman says. It's like a knife directly to the chest, the kind of attack that only Cartman has ever been able to launch on him.

"So here's the gas station," Kenny says needlessly, practically shouting. He squeals into a parking space, the car's tires kicking up clouds of dirt.

"Let's get out and get a drink," Stan says. Kyle is still frozen in a kind of white hot rage combined with icy mortification. So even Cartman knew that he was being metaphorical before. He wasn't asking about Wendy, he was asking about himself.

"C'mon," Stan says, tugging Kyle out of the car. "I want to take some pictures, too."

The landscape is bleak, windy and hot, and there's really nothing to take pictures of, but Kyle humors Stan, following him around back of the gas station's small convenience store. He feels hollowed out, like he just made a confession in front of all four of them. There have been moments, like now, when he's wondered if he ever really fooled anyone.

"Smile," Stan says. Kyle is standing with his hands on his elbows, in front of a dim backdrop of some far away mountains.

"I'm thirsty," Kyle says. "I thought we were getting drinks."

"We are, just one second." Stan takes a picture, though Kyle isn't smiling. "I want to remember this."

"Why?"

"I don't know." Stan looks down at the camera, and Kyle feels guilty. Kyle wants to remember it all, every second. He walks over to Stan and laughs when he sees the preview screen on the camera. He looks miserable in the picture, on the verge of throwing a tantrum.

"We'd better go in there," he says. "Cartman might be waving his gun around."

Stan nods. Kyle wants a picture of him just like this, sunlit and sort of sad, looking at Kyle like he wants him to play along, to carry out the rest of the trip like it will never end, like the pictures will be enough when it's over. Kyle wants to hug him, but he can't, because he'll end up kissing him if he gets any closer. He's had so many nightmares about accidentally kissing Stan. Good dreams about Stan kissing him are far more rare, and he cherishes the few he can remember. In one he was sitting on a kitchen counter at some house party when Stan walked up, parted his legs and settled between them. He didn't even pause to blink, just leaned in and kissed Kyle like it was his right, like he'd done it a million times. Kyle had always wanted it to happen that way, back when he thought it might actually happen.

Inside the shop there's no commotion, just Cartman buying an armload of snack foods. Kenny has already paid for the gas, and seems pleased with himself. Kyle buys a bottle of water for later and a Mountain Dew for now. He needs some caffeine, or he'll end up sleeping through the majority of this trip.

"Check it out," Cartman says, whispering loudly as they stand in line to pay. He nods to a girl in a long dress who is perusing the magazine stand. "She's one of them," he says.

"One of who?" Stan asks.

"The hill people, dumb ass!"

The cashier is giving them an unfriendly stare. Kyle turns red and thinks about trying to apologize for Cartman, but just the idea of trying to is exhausting. He pays for his drinks and hurries back to the car, Stan trailing behind him.

"So how do you think I should respond?" Stan says.

"Huh?"

"To Wendy. What should I text back? To make her feel better or whatever."

Kyle throws the water into the backseat and twists the cap off the Mountain Dew. He kind of wants to punch Stan for asking him this, but Kyle invited the question, and Stan might really be asking something else.

"There's really nothing you can tell her that will make her feel better," Kyle says. "But I'm sure she'd be happy just to hear from you."

Stan stares at him like he's waiting for more. Kyle doesn't have any further wisdom on the subject. He climbs into the back and brushes pretzel crumbs from the seat.

"I'm gonna drive," Stan says.

"Okay."

"Kyle!"

"What?"

"Sit up front!"

"Oh." Kyle grins, and rushes to claim the seat before Cartman can.

The Mountain Dew helps for a little while, and Kyle starts talking a lot, fast, about nothing in particular. Stan mostly listens, laughing when Kyle gets worked up about something their Biology teacher said to him years ago that still pisses him off. Cartman eats snacks and complains about their music choices, then about National Forests, the federal government, and Kyle's hair. Kyle turns the music up loud so he won't have to listen to him. Kenny sleeps and checks his phone obsessively. Kyle wonders who he's waiting to hear from, and makes a mental note to steal Stan away for an explanation about the Kenny Situation once they get to their campsite.

"Aren't you guys dying for a shower?" Kyle asks. He feels dirty again, and can smell a combination of everyone's sweat.

"They have facilities at the park we're gonna stay in," Stan says. "Outdoor showers."

"Outdoor!" Kyle gapes at him. Cartman will use this as an excuse to play some kind of prank on him.

"I'll guard you," Stan says. Cartman snorts.

"Yeah, I'll bet you will," he says. "Don't forget to bring your camera."

"Fuck off," Stan says. "I'll be guarding him from you."

"Me! I don't want to be within fifty yards of Kyle's naked ass."

"Yeah, right."

"Everyone stop talking about my ass," Kyle says. He hates it when Stan insinuates that Cartman's obsession with him is sexual in some fashion. Not only because it's a horrific thought, but because it's embarrassing when Stan acts like he's protecting Kyle's honor from Cartman's devious desires.

"I'm not taking a shower in some nasty outdoor stall," Cartman says. "That thing will be crawling with hippie germs."

"You can wear flip flops," Stan says. Kyle groans.

"Can't we just get a motel room?" he asks.

"Whoa, call the newspapers," Cartman says. "A Jew actually volunteered to spend money."

"Shut up, fat ass!"

"What? I agree with you! And congratulations on your progress as a human being."

"The outdoor showers aren't that bad!" Stan says. "Some scummy motel shower would probably be worse."

Kyle withholds a second groan. His idea of traveling is very different from Stan's. When Kyle's family goes on vacation, they stay in four or five star hotels. He feels like bragging about this as proof that Jews *do* spend money, but doesn't want to make Kenny feel bad.

The Fishlake National Forest campgrounds are more crowded than Grand Mesa, especially as they get closer to the lake. They stop at the visitor's center to rent fishing equipment, and Kenny and Cartman manage to refrain from attracting the attention of any park rangers. When they get to the campsite Kyle immediately inspects the outdoor showers. They're even slimier than he feared.

"Great plan, Stan," Cartman says. "We might as well just jump in the fucking lake."

"I think I will," Stan says. He pulls his shirt off, and Kyle has to force himself not to look. Sometime around middle school, Stan's shirtlessness began to affect him profoundly. Kyle can't witness it without imagining the heat of Stan's skin against his cheek, and how good it would feel to lie on top of him. Stan's skin smells like heaven even through his t-shirts, and he's especially fragrant right now, in a way that shouldn't make Kyle want to lick him everywhere.

"C'mon," Stan says, rattling Kyle when he grabs his arm. "Come with me."

"It'll be cold as a witch's tit," Cartman says.

"So?" Stan says. "Don't be such a pussy. Me and Kyle aren't scared. Right?" He gives Kyle's arm a shake.

"Um," Kyle says. "Right." It does sound kind of nice, clean mountain water washing away his dried sweat, but he's a wimp about being cold. Stan is pulling him toward the lake.

"Look," Stan says. "Some little kids are playing in the water. I guess they're braver than you, Cartman."

"Your reverse psychology bullshit is not going to work on me," Cartman says. "You two homos can have fun pretending to be mermaids together. I'm gonna find a working toilet somewhere in these godforsaken woods and put something down on paper, if you know what I'm saying."

"Quit talking about your plans to crap," Stan says. "Kenny?"

"No," Kenny says. "I don't need to crap. Thanks for asking, though."

"I meant are you coming swimming?"

"I don't think so. You guys have fun." He gives Kyle a look that makes Kyle's guilt about looking forward to talking about him behind his back evaporate.

"I'm gonna get my swim shorts from the car," Stan says. "You packed yours, right?"

"Yeah." Kyle was envisioning hotel pools when he did, and Stan stretched out on the lounge chair next to his, wet and glistening. Eventually, in California, they'll stay at a hotel, but that will be the last day of the trip, and Kyle's vision will have tunneled to Life Without Stan so completely that whatever Stan does as his present company won't reach him.

They change into their suits in the outdoor shower area, behind a flimsy curtain, and Stan keeps guard for Kyle as promised. He does the same for Stan, his face heating as he listens to the sound of Stan unzipping his jeans. He hasn't seen Stan without his clothes since they were kids. They used to change out of their bathing suits in front of each other without thinking about it. Kyle was the one who started changing in the bathroom instead, not because he thought Stan would look at him but because he'd started to want to look at Stan.

When they get to the edge of the lake, Stan runs into the water, stopping when it's up to his knees. He turns back to Kyle and smiles sheepishly, confirming Cartman's theory: cold as a witch's tit. Kyle winces as soon as he puts a toe in, but walks forward toward Stan anyway, because he doesn't want to be a pussy, and because Stan is magnetic when he's half-dressed, being a bitch about nature and smiling at Kyle from over his shoulder.

"Are we seriously going to swim?" Kyle asks when he's reached Stan, both of them already shivering.

"I think we have to," Stan says. "Or we'll never hear the end of it from Cartman."

"What have you gotten me into?" Kyle asks. Stan touches his hip. Kyle hopes Kenny isn't watching this from the shore.

"I bet once we start swimming we'll warm up," Stan says. "I'll race you out into the deep part?"

Kyle whines, despite himself. He doesn't like the idea of what could be lurking on the bottom of lakes like this. Garbage, corpses, undiscovered sea monsters.

"You still have to tell me about Kenny," Kyle says.

"Oh, God, that." Stan groans. "Okay, but race me first. Ready? Go!"

He takes off, and Kyle hesitates for only half a second before diving in to the water and tearing after him. He's never liked losing races to Stan; Kyle has always been the faster one. The chill of the water makes his lungs feel like they've been coated in ice, his breath coming

in shallow stabs as he fights to catch up with Stan. He's making progress, powered by Mountain Dew and the sugary plate of carbs he ate for breakfast. Stan is still slightly ahead of him when he stops and turns back, panting.

"Warm yet?" Stan asks.

"Well." Kyle is out of breath, too, shot through with adrenaline. "I'm less freezing."

They look back toward the shore, which is farther than Kyle thought it would be after what felt like a short swim. There are still a few kids playing at the edge of the lake, laughing and splashing each other while their parents watch from folding chairs, drinking beers.

"Do you ever wish you were still that age?" Stan asks.

"Not really," Kyle says, remembering what it was like before he had his driver's license, having to ask permission for everything. Not that it was so different after he got his license. He's ready to be free of his parents.

"Everything was so easy, though," Stan says.

"You're remembering it wrong. Some things still sucked."

"I guess." Stan is pouting. Kyle splashes him, and Stan retaliates by dunking him.

"Fuck, dude!" Kyle shouts when Stan pulls him up, laughing. "My hair!"

"That's the gayest thing you've ever said," Stan says, laughing harder. Kyle growls and dunks him, getting the sense that Stan is only letting him do it. He can definitely out-wrestle Kyle now, even while treading water. When he comes up he spits a mouthful of it onto Kyle's head, the trajectory of it arching neatly.

"Sorry, did I mess up your hair?" he asks, still laughing. Kyle splashes him and swims toward the shore. Stan follows, and Kyle refuses to look at him when he tries to engage him in another play fight, splashing him weakly as they swim.

"Tell me about Kenny," Kyle says.

"You're so worried about him."

"Yeah? You were, too, when you ran after him last night without even taking a goddamn flashlight."

"Okay, fine. I'll tell you, but we should wait until we can stand."

"How come?"

"'Cause you might faint."

"Oh, Jesus. What do you mean?"

"It's pretty fucking shocking, dude."

"More shocking than - that time?" Kyle asks. He stops to tread water while he waits for the answer. Stan does, too, and tests his feet against the lake bottom to see if he can stand. He can, just barely, but Kyle can't even manage it on his tip-toes.

"No," Stan says. "It's not as bad as that time."

Neither of them needs to clarify: the time Kenny showed up at the bus stop battered, the time they spent the whole week huddled around him in Stan's bed while he recovered. Kyle nods.

"Good," he says.

"It's just weird," Stan says. "Really weird."

They swim to the shore and sit on the grass, both of them shivering until the sun begins to suck the water from their skin. Kyle doesn't feel any cleaner; he imagines lake germs taking up residence in his hair.

"So?" he says. He bumps his shoulder against Stan's, wishing for a fluffy towel, something big enough for both of them. "Tell me."

Stan sighs. He looks at Kyle, then checks back over his shoulder to make sure no one will overhear. Kyle's imagination is reeling. Kenny used to joke about hooking in North Park on weekends. If that's what Stan is about to tell him, he'll never stop flipping out.

"It's Butters," Stan says. He makes a queasy face. "Kenny is, like. With him."

"Huh?"

"We had this big talk, or whatever." Stan rolls his eyes. "That night when Kenny ran off. I found him, and he was all pissed off at me. Well, he was drunk. But he was saying that at some point he got really sick of me and you looking out for him, blah blah. I guess because of that one time. I mean, we did kind of treat him like a wounded bird. But he *was* a wounded bird, dude. Anyway, he said at some point, when things were shitty at home, he started going to Butters instead of us, just because Butters will put up with anything and Kenny didn't give a crap about Butters' opinion of him."

"Wait," Kyle says, something huge beginning to dawn on him, like a giant blimp slowly sliding across the sun. "Wait."

"Just - let me finish, dude. So he started doing this at the beginning of high school, I guess. He'd climb in Butters' window at night, Butters would give him cookies and milk, then they'd go to sleep together. He says he got addicted to sleeping with someone else there 'cause of how we let him sleep in my bed after, you know. So he'd just sleep there, or if he was drunk he'd start blubbering about whatever problems he was having, and Butters would pet him and stuff. I mean, you know how Butters is."

"Hang on," Kyle says. He looks over his shoulder. Kenny and Cartman aren't in sight. "Are you telling me - are you saying -?"

"Yes, dude, but let me finish! Okay, so Kenny is kind of using Butters at this point, at least that's how he described it, and sometime around sophomore year he starts feeling shitty about it. So he starts asking Butters what his problems are, and Butters is all reluctant to tell him at first, but then he starts confiding in Kenny, too. And they become friends for real. Kenny starts kicking the asses of people who make fun of Butters at school, Butters starts doing Kenny's homework for him. And then at some point, this year apparently, they start having, like. Mad gay sex with each other, too."

"Jesus Christ!"

"I know, dude," Stan says. "It's like, of all people - Kenny? I mean, Butters is no big surprise, he basically came out in elementary school, but Kenny? Anyway, I just feel bad for him, because Butters' parents found out about the whole thing, barred the window, took away Butters' cell phone, and grounded him from the trip. That's the real reason he couldn't come, not the stupid valedictorian thing. And they're sending him to some Catholic school in Cincinnati. And encouraging him to enter the priesthood, apparently."

"Fuck."

"So that's the big Kenny drama," Stan says. "Obviously, you can't tell him I told you, and you can't tell anyone else."

"Why did he tell you and not me?"

"I don't know, dude, because he was drunk and I was the one who ran after him. I can't even tell if he remembers that he told me. I think he does, though. He seems kind of happier, like there was a weight taken off his shoulders."

"Yeah." Kyle pulls his knees to his chest and stares at the lake. Kenny is gay. Right. Of course. Kyle always assumed that Kenny gave him pointed looks because he knows him so well, and has seen him around Stan for so long, but it's not just that. He's been pissed at Kyle because he's pissed at himself. They've both been lying to everyone. Kenny has a better reason, though; he was keeping someone else's secret, too.

"Dude, what are you thinking?" Stan asks, elbowing him. "Don't be mad at Kenny."

"I'm not mad."

"You look sort of freaked out, though."

"Well, yeah! Weren't you, when you heard this?"

"Sure, of course, but mostly about the Butters thing. The gay thing threw me just because, you know - boobs and Kenny, it's like milk and cereal, they go together. But he was like, 'oh, sometimes Butters likes to dress up like a girl, that was one of the things he confessed to me - '"

"Okay, stop." Kyle closes his eyes and puts his hands over his face. "This is, like, too much to take in."

"Alright." Stan pats his back. "You asked, though."

"Yeah, I did. And this is pretty much the last thing I expected you to tell me. God, I was afraid he was prostituting himself or something."

"Jesus, Kyle! Well, you should be relieved, then. Except that I think he's in love with Butters, and he's afraid Butters will never go against his parents, that he'll end up a priest who lives in Cincinnati and is miserable."

"That sounds kind of likely, actually," Kyle says, muttering. He feels almost cheered for a moment: someone else from South Park will be living in miserable denial. Then it just makes him feel worse. They hear footsteps behind them and turn to see Cartman coming toward them.

"Well, I hope you're happy, Stan," he says, bellowing. "I had to crap in the woods and wipe with leaves."

"Jesus, sick!" Kyle says. Stan just laughs.

"You'd better swim in the lake, then," he says. "And take some soap with you, dude."

"I already used the hippie shower," Cartman says, glowering. "It was horrible. Will you listen to your Jew boyfriend and get us a goddamn motel room already?"

"No," Stan says. "We're just about to start fishing. You want to help?"

"Ha! Yeah, right. And I'm not eating any bottom-feeding goddamn hippie fish, either."

"Suit yourself," Stan says. He elbows Kyle. "Want to get the poles?"

"Put your shirts back on and quit talking about your poles in mixed company!" Cartman shouts as he walks off. Kyle rolls his eyes.

"Thank God he doesn't know about this Butters thing," he says when Cartman is gone. "He'd have a goddamn field day."

"Cartman thinks everyone but him is gay, anyway," Stan says. He stands and offers Kyle his hand, grinning as he pulls him up. "You know what I've always thought would be really funny?"

"What?" Kyle asks, warily.

"If me and you pretended to be gay together, just to like, deflate all of his stupid jokes."

"Ha." Kyle lets go of Stan's hand, heat spreading through his chest like a fever. "Yeah. But no. He'd love that. He'd just gloat, 'cause that would mean he was right all along."

Stan shrugs. "I don't know. I still think it'd be pretty funny."

The heat leaves Kyle's chest as they walk back to the campsite, and he feels colder than he did in the lake, his hands shaking. It would be a joke to Stan, the two of them. He would ham it up, keeping his arm around Kyle, taunting Cartman with made up stories about what they do during their sleepovers. Just thinking about it makes Kyle's stomach pitch, and when he crawls into the tent that Kenny has set up for them, dry clothes clutched to his chest, he has to sit on his knees and concentrate on breathing steadily for awhile, afraid he'll throw up.

"You okay?" Kenny asks when Kyle emerges, dressed and still shaky. He nods and sits down beside Kenny on a flat stone beside the fire pit area.

"Um," Kyle says. He rubs his hand over his face. "Do you have any more alcohol?"

"What a question," Kenny says, grinning. He digs out his flask and passes it to Kyle. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"No," Kyle says. He drinks from the flask, winces, and drinks again. Kenny slides his arm around Kyle's shoulders.

"I know you're not okay," Kenny says. Kyle could scoff, refute this, tell Kenny that he knows he's not okay, too. He just nods, staring at the ground and hoping Kenny won't make him talk about it. Kenny squeezes Kyle's shoulder and takes a deep drink from the flask when he passes it back.

"What the hell, man," Kenny says. "Everything ends."

"Yeah." Kyle can't imagine how he'll ever accept that, but he doesn't really think that Kenny has, either. Stan unzips the tent and crawls out, dressed in jeans and a clean t-shirt. He gathers up the fishing stuff and walks over to them, raising his eyebrows when he sees Kenny's arm around Kyle's shoulders.

"Are you guys having a moment?" he asks.

"Would that be okay with you?" Kenny asks. Stan makes a face at him. Kenny drinks from the flask and offers it to Kyle, who shakes his head.

"I don't want to get drunk," Kyle says, embarrassed. He stands, his legs still wobbly. "Come fish with us," he says to Kenny.

"Oh, fine," Kenny says. "But only if I can keep drinking."

He does, and Stan joins him, Kyle taking the occasional sip as well. They're sitting at the edge of what apparently is a good fishing area, their legs hanging over the side of a mossy outcropping, lures bobbing in the water. Stan thinks using real worms is cruel, so they've opted for the plastic, glittery kind.

"Why aren't the fish biting?" Stan asks, sounding kind of drunk. Kyle considers the fact that they had only a small bag of pretzels for lunch. He leans against Kenny's shoulder, feeling sleepy. Kenny is sitting between him and Stan, his hood pulled up though it's still hot outside.

"I don't know, but I'm fucking hungry," Kenny says. "And the sun's starting to go down."

"We could go to a Denny's, and then stay at one of those motels that's always near a Denny's," Kyle says. He laughs at himself when he hears the slur in his voice.

"But I want to sleep under the stars," Stan says. Kenny snorts.

"You're such a fag, dude," he says.

"You are," Stan says, shouldering him. Kyle swallows down a yelp of protest. They can't say that to Kenny anymore. Kenny's still grinning, only his mouth and the tip of his nose visible, his hood pulled down over his eyes.

"Fair enough," he says.

"You know what I mean," Stan says, groaning. "And it's not faggy to appreciate the stars, okay? Kyle, don't you want to sleep out here? It's not creepy like the last place. There's lots of people around."

"Kyle just said he wants a motel," Kenny says.

"Since when are you the boss of Kyle?" Stan asks.

"Since when are you?"

"It's fine," Kyle says. "We can stay here. We'll save money, and it's kind of nice."

"Oh, wait, I forgot," Kenny says. "Stan is the boss of Kyle."

"Fuck you," Kyle says, unenthusiastically.

"Everybody shut up," Stan says. "You're scaring the fish."

"You started it," Kenny says.

"I did not!"

They don't catch anything. The sun disappears and they reel in their lines, stumbling back to camp in the dark. Cartman is there, elbow-deep in a bag of Cheesy Poofs, the fire pit still dark and cold.

"Where's the fish?" he asks.

"What do you care?" Stan says. "You weren't gonna eat them anyway."

"Well, you dumb asses aren't having any of my snacks."

"Good," Kenny says. "We don't want them."

Kyle actually does want them. Even Cheesy Poofs sound amazing right now, his stomach groaning and his head swimming. He gets Stan's sleeping bag from the car and spreads it out near the tent, then goes back for the blanket and pillows.

"You're going to sleep?" Stan says.

"I guess," Kyle says. "There's nothing else to do."

"We could look at constellations," Stan says. He flops down onto the sleeping bag and pulls the blanket up over his legs. Kyle can hear his stomach growling, too. They both stare up at the stars for awhile, saying nothing, listening to Cartman crunch Cheesy Poofs between his teeth. Kyle feels too disoriented to recognize any constellations. He keeps thinking about what Stan said earlier. *Wouldn't it be funny?* Hilarious, the punch line for Kyle's life.

"There's the crow," Stan says, pointing. "And the seven sisters."

"Are you gonna take Astronomy for one of your electives?" Kyle asks.

"Probably. You?"

"I don't know. Maybe." Kyle pulls the blanket up to his chin and rolls onto his side, toward Stan. He closes his eyes and listens to the noises from other campsites. Someone is singing campfire songs in the far distance, maybe from the other side of the lake. It sounds kind of eerie. Kyle keeps his eyes closed when Stan shifts under the blanket, rolling toward him.

"Kenny's sleeping in the car again," he says, whispering. "He'd better not be jerking off in there."

"Gross."

"Yeah. Especially now that we know what he's probably jerking to."

"Dude!"

"Sorry." Stan goes quiet, and Kyle can feel him studying his face. He tries to keep his features as still as possible, but his eyebrows keep creasing without his permission.

"So did you ever text Wendy?" Kyle asks.

"Oh, fuck. I forgot. I'll do it in the morning."

"What are you going to say?"

"I don't know. That I miss her?"

"You're asking me?" Kyle cracks his eyes open.

"Yeah, I guess I'm asking you." Stan sounds annoyed, but he moves closer, like he doesn't want Cartman to hear this.

"Asking me if you miss her? Or if that's what you should tell her?"

"Why are you being a jerk?"

"I'm not!" Kyle rolls away from Stan, mad at him for bringing this up. Though, actually, wait. Kyle brought it up. Stan sighs.

"I wonder what Butters is doing right now," he says.

"Masturbating to Kenny?" Kyle says. Stan snickers.

"While wearing a dress?"

"Probably."

Under the blanket, Stan finds the hem of Kyle's t-shirt and tugs on it until he rolls onto his back. Stan smiles at him, then looks up at the stars again.

"I wish we could do this all summer," he says.

"Lie in the dark, starving to death, listening to Cartman gorge himself?"

"Yeah, Kyle." Stan pulls on one of his curls. "You know what I mean."

"Well, we can't do it all summer. And we can't go back in time and be kids again. And you can't come to my school, and I can't come to yours."

"Why are you trying to pick a fight?" Stan asks.

"I'm not. I'm just sick of all your hypotheticals, okay? You're making me feel worse."

He rolls away again. He's had too much to drink and too little to eat, and Cartman has gone conspicuously silent, probably eavesdropping and enjoying this. Kyle tries to get comfortable, to go to sleep so that morning and breakfast will arrive faster, but he's hollowed out and hurting, and he can feel Stan's wakefulness like the sun against his back, full strength.

"I'm sorry," Stan says. He sounds sincere. Kyle pretends not to hear him, and listens to him roll over, away from him.

Again, Kyle has terrible dreams. These are less violent than last night's, more anxiety-riddled. He accidentally shows up for school in a dress, thereby announcing his feelings for Stan to everyone. Even Butters makes fun of him, though he's also wearing a dress, and crying. He has other dreams, all of them basically along these lines, and wakes up intermittently to make sure Stan is still beside him. This comforts him for about half a second, then enrages him, because Stan has some nerve sharing a sleeping bag with him when he probably, basically knows how Kyle feels about him. Kyle lies awake, irrational with hunger and exhaustion, asking God to keep Stan from ever touching him again, because fuck hope, and longing, and the past seven or eight years of his life that he's wasted on them. Fuck how important every thoughtless brush of Stan's fingers has been. Fuck how he radiates warmth under the blanket, how Kyle can feel it even without putting his hand against Stan's back, and how he wants to put his hand there anyway.

As dawn breaks his sleep because less restless and rage-filled, and he dreams about food instead of rank humiliation. Stan wakes up first, and Kyle hears him punching the buttons on

his phone. Texting Wendy. He hears Cartman beginning to rouse, grumbling about mosquitoes, and hears a car door opening from across the clearing, Kenny tumbling out with a yawn. He thinks about pretending to be asleep for a little while longer, at least until Stan finishes texting Wendy, but he's too hungry. He sits up, feeling like a rusted doorjamb, his head aching.

"Can we get the fuck out of here?" Cartman asks. He's rifling through his supply of snacks, finding only empty wrappers. "It's Vegas next, right?"

"Yep," Stan says. "Well, the Lake Mead National Recreation Area, then we can do a day trip into Vegas -"

"No," Kyle says. He moans and puts his head in his hands, elbows on his knees. "No. I don't even care if it has to be my treat. I want a real shower. We can get one of those cheap ass Vegas hotels."

"But," Stan says. He looks up from his phone. "The Hoover Dam -"

"We can drive over the fucking Dam!" Cartman says. "I'm with Jew Boy. Kenny, you obviously won't be contributing financially, so you don't get a vote. That makes it 2-1 in favor of a hotel."

"Fuck you, I'll contribute," Kenny says. "And yeah, hotel room, fine. I'm gonna be in the casinos the whole time either way."

"Oh, God," Cartman says. "You poor people and your desperate love of gambling. It's almost cute."

"Shut up!" Kyle roars, realizing only after he's shouted that he's still in a terrible mood. "Cartman, I swear to fucking God, if you don't lay off of him -"

"Goddamn, are you getting porked by Kenny now, too?" Cartman stands up and stretches, one arm over his head while he scratches at his stomach with the other. "Sorry I insulted your new boyfriend, Kyle."

"Everybody shut up and let's pack up our stuff," Stan says. "I'm fucking starving." He slips his phone into his pocket. Message sent, apparently. Kyle won't ask about what brilliant Stan Marsh eloquence he came up with to reassure her. Not now, not ever.

The mood in the car is not a good one. Cartman is driving, Stan up front because neither Kenny nor Kyle is willing to sit next to him without committing acts of physical violence. Cartman makes sure the music is the most obnoxious shit possible: the Peanut Butter Jelly Time song, blasting. When Kenny's phone beeps with a new text message, the sound is almost lost in the noise from the stereo. Kyle watches him read it out of the corner of his eye.

"Pull over," Kenny says, his eyes still on his phone.

"No bathroom breaks until I find some real food," Cartman says.

"Pull over," Kenny says again. His jaw is tight, and his voice sounds like it did when he told Stan and Kyle to stop treating him like a goddamn charity case during school lunches. Stan turns to frown at him.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"We need to figure out how to go south from here," Kenny says. "To Phoenix."

"What for?" Kyle asks. It's got to be a prank he's playing on Cartman. Kyle would have appreciated being kept in the loop. Maybe Stan knows all about it.

"We have to go to the airport in Phoenix," Kenny says. "Now. Pull the fuck over, Cartman, did you not hear me?"

"Dude, what the hell?" Stan says. "What's at the airport in Phoenix?"

"Butters," Kenny says. "He's there. Get him to pull over, Stan, I don't care if you have knock him out."

"That's probably not a good idea, considering we're going eighty," Kyle says. "Look - calm down - Butters texted you just now? What the fuck is he doing in Phoenix?"

"He left home - Cartman, fucking pull over you son of a bitch!" Kenny is screaming now. Stan looks at Kyle with alarm. Cartman just laughs.

"Well, well," he said. "Butters finally grew some balls and left those freaks, huh? I never thought I'd see the day. Regardless, that is his fucking problem, not ours."

"Pull the fuck over!" Kenny looks like he's ready to do murder, his hands in fists.

"Kenny, dude -" Stan tries to say.

"I'll pull over when I find a fucking Waffle House, bitch!" Cartman says. "Then you can catch a bus to Phoenix and cash in your free blow job ticket from Butters, goddamn."

Kenny lunges at Cartman, and Kyle and Stan both shout with surprise, trying to restrain him. Cartman curses, eyes wide as the car swerves across the highway. Kenny is out of his mind, trying to get the wheel out of Cartman's hand, and the car is fishtailing, headed toward the railing that looks down over a steep ravine.

"Kenny are you fucking insane!" Kyle screams, panic making his voice so shrill that he barely recognizes it.

"Cartman, just fucking *brake*!" Stan shouts. Kenny is trying his damnedest to punch Cartman in the head, and Kyle is barely succeeding in holding his fist back. Cartman slams on the brakes and the car starts to spin, all of them screaming as dirt and sand cloud up around the windows, the tires squealing. They hit the railing hard, and Kyle closes his eyes, waiting to hear the sound of metal crunching as they tumble over the railing, down into the ravine. Nothing comes. All he can hear is everyone in the car breathing heavily.

Kyle gets out of the car first, after checking to make sure that his side is the one adjoining the road, not the cliff. His legs aren't quite working, so he drops down onto his knees and dry heaves a few times, choking on the dust the car kicked up while it was spinning. There's nobody else on Highway 14 this early in the morning, and the quiet seems obscene after what just happened. Inside the car, Stan is screaming at Kenny, calling him a lunatic, but it seems very far away and unimportant. Cartman throws himself out of the car and lands beside Kyle, puking so furiously that some splashes onto Kyle's hand. Kyle doesn't care. He wants to bow down and kiss the ground, Cartman's puke and all.

"Jesus, we could have died," Kyle says. He may have already said this ten or twenty times; his sense of reality is just beginning to return to him. "We could have died, we could have died."

"Yeah," Cartman says. He stands shakily, wiping his mouth. "And now I'm gonna kill motherfucking Kenny."

At the moment it actually sounds like a pretty good idea. Kenny is shouting back at Stan, saying he's sorry, but Cartman can't just do whatever he wants, and he always has, and fuck him. Kyle puts his elbows on the ground, tucking his head in between them. He hears Cartman trying to get into the car as Stan tries to get out.

"Move!" Stan shouts, and then he's all around Kyle, pulling him up onto his knees. "Are you okay?" he asks. "Are you hurt?" He's kneeling in some of Cartman's puke.

"I'm okay," Kyle says. Stan doesn't seem to hear this or believe it. He's checking Kyle for injuries, his hands moving up along his ribs, across the back of his neck, through his hair. He nods to himself when he finds no blood or cracked bones, then checks again. They're both shaking, eyes locked, and Kyle feels like he's in the very last moments of a dream that he won't remember. Behind them, Cartman has managed to yank Kenny out of the car, but Kenny lands the first punch, directly to Cartman's stomach.

"You can only push people so far, okay?" Kenny shouts. His voice is pinched, shaky, and Kyle knows Kenny must feel terrible in hindsight, but he's kind of hoping that Cartman gets in a few blows. Cartman rights himself with a growl and runs at Kenny, slamming him against the side of the car.

"Stop, you fucking morons!" Stan shouts. "You're gonna knock the car over the railing!" He grabs Cartman and holds him, and Kyle does the same with Kenny, dragging him away from the car. Kenny allows himself to be restrained much more readily than Cartman, who is still snarling, trying to buck Stan off of him.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Cartman shouts. "You think you're invincible? Were you going to walk to Phoenix by yourself after you crashed the fucking car and killed the rest of us?"

"I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking!" Kenny says. He jerks against Kyle's grip halfheartedly, and Kyle keeps hold of him, though he still wants to hit him himself. "It was stupid, but you're so - you don't fucking care about anyone! You care more about getting waffles than Butters having a breakdown, alone, fucking scared? He would help you if you needed it, Eric. I don't

care how stupid and delusional you are, you know he's a good person. And you don't even care about him, you wouldn't even care if he fucking died."

"He's not dying, you dumb shit!" Cartman shouts. He manages to throw Stan off of him, but just stands there wiping dirt from his face, glaring at Kenny. "And what the fuck is this? You're still obsessed with saving people? We're not playing super heroes anymore, retard. Butters is an adult, he can take care of himself."

"Cartman, you don't understand," Stan says. He's still out of breath; there's dirt in his hair. Kyle feels like he's caked in the stuff, and the fact that he touched Cartman's puke is beginning to bother him. "Everybody get out of the way," Stan says. "I'm gonna move the car before we get back in."

"No, I'll do it," Kenny says. "I'm the one who - ah, shit. I'm really fucking sorry. I'm serious." Kyle lets go of him, and Kenny turns to look at him. "I'm sorry," he says again. Kyle shakes his head.

"Whatever," he says, not ready to accept that. "Move the car."

They stand aside while Kenny pulls the car away from the railing, all of them wincing as metal scrapes against metal. Stan curses when he sees the damage. It's mostly cosmetic, paint scraped away.

"I promise I'll pay for it," Kenny says when Stan pulls open the driver's side door.

"Fine," Stan says. "Just - get out. I'm gonna drive for awhile."

"Stan." Kenny still has his hands around the steering wheel. He looks broken, worse than he did at fourteen, with his black eye and cracked rib. "Please -"

"We can go get Butters," Stan says sharply. "Look up how to get to Phoenix from here. But I'm gonna drive. Alright?"

"Alright," Kenny says, nodding. He climbs out of the car clumsily, like he's still not sure he's on solid ground, and hugs Stan, burying his face against Stan's shoulder. Stan scoffs but doesn't push him away. He pats Kenny's back, squeezes his arm.

"You better not put your fucking hands on me," Cartman says when Kenny lets go of Stan. Kenny glares at him.

"Yeah, no thanks," he says. He walks around to the passenger seat. "Sorry, Kyle," he says. "But I don't think you want me back there with him right now."

"Uh, you could let me have shotgun, considering you almost killed me and all," Cartman says. "But, no, that's cool, brah, do whatever you want, fine, great."

"Get in the goddamn car," Stan says. Cartman scoffs and does so, trekking through the puddle of puke one last time for good measure. Kyle climbs into the back with him, still rattled, and trying to figure out what a detour in Phoenix will mean for their overall trip plan. He can't really think about geography right now, barely knows which way is up.

“So, let me get this straight,” Cartman says as they pull back onto the highway, going in the opposite direction after consulting Google Maps on Kenny's phone. “We're *rewarding* Kenny for almost killing all of us. That's good. That's great.”

“How about nobody talks for several hours?” Stan says.

“Dude, I still need food,” Kyle says. “Kenny, are you going to try to strangle Stan if he pulls over so we can eat for the first time in like, twenty-four hours?”

“Kyle,” Kenny says. He doesn't turn to look at him. He's picking at his fingernails, which are dirt caked.

“And I'm really psyched that we have to wait until Phoenix now, I guess, to take showers,” Kyle says. “That's, what? Like ten hours from here.”

“Nine,” Stan says, gravely.

“You guys don't understand,” Kenny says. “I'm sorry, I didn't want to fuck up anybody's plans, and I'm not gonna flip out if we stop to buy something to eat. But we have to eat in the car, okay? He sounded – bad. In his text. And you guys don't know what defying his parents means to him. He can never go back, and he – he's really –” Kenny trails off there, and for a moment Kyle is afraid he's actually going to cry. Stan sighs hugely.

“We'll pull off the highway as soon as we see a fast food place,” Stan says. “And yeah, we can eat in the car. Kyle, you can have the shower first when we get to Phoenix. We can get a hotel room there. It'll be, like. Shit - seven o'clock at night by the time we get there.”

Kyle rests his head against the window and folds his arms over his stomach. He doesn't feel hungry anymore, though his stomach is aching with emptiness. He thinks of Butters, alone at the airport, wringing his hands, wondering if they'll show up to save him.

“Does Butters have any money?” Kyle asks.

“I don't know if he has money,” Kenny says. “He must have some, 'cause he bought a plane ticket to Phoenix. Shit, I'm so proud of him. I never thought he'd break free from them. He's so brainwashed.”

“Do you know anything about how he left things with them?” Stan asks. “Was there a fight?”

“I don't know the details,” Kenny says. “He borrowed some stranger's phone at the airport to text me. All he said was where he was and to please come get him.”

“Some stranger's phone?” Cartman kicks the back of Kenny's seat. “Are you kidding me? How do you know it's not just Craig playing a prank on you?”

“We have a kind of code word,” Kenny says. “He used it in the text.”

“Code word? Jesus Christ, since when are you friends with Butters?”

“Um, probably since the time when I wasn't friends with you anymore? And didn't have to tell you shit about my life?”

“Goddammit, can you both be quiet for awhile?” Stan says. “I have a headache.”

“Sorry,” Kenny says. “Get on US-89 up here, south.”

“How long am I going to be on US-89?” Stan asks.

“Um,” Kenny says. “'Bout, like. Two hundred miles.”

Kyle and Cartman groan in unison. Kyle can't remember the last time he was this mad at Kenny. It's not just Kenny's momentary insanity and the near-death experience. It's the fact that he's able to turn the world on its fucking ear to be with the person he loves. Kenny is getting what he wants, and Kyle isn't going to. Kenny's secret person loves him back.

Stan's reflection is visible in the driver's side mirror, and Kyle lets himself stare. He thinks of how Stan checked him after the crash, how he felt every rib twice. Fine; Stan loves him. He's just never going to climb through a window for him.

Chapter 4

They stop at McDonald's for sustenance, and Kyle's appetite is back as soon as he smells bacon grease. He usually tries to keep kosher, for his parents' sake more than anything, but after his near-death experience he feels confident that God will forgive him for a few bacon, egg and cheese sandwiches. He's so hungry that he's temporarily able to ignore the stale smell of puke that has infested the car, though he can't forget the fact that his hands are filthy. He's careful to hold his sandwiches and hashbrowns only by their wrappers so that they don't get contaminated.

"I want to marry McDonalds," Stan says, his mouth full of McMuffin. He's in the backseat with Cartman. Kenny is driving, too fast, and Kyle is up front with him. He laughs and turns back to Stan.

"You sound like Cartman," he says. "Though I kind of agree."

"God, I'm so happy right now," Cartman says. He's forking syrup-covered McPancakes into his mouth. "I'm alive and eating the greatest food in the world. Fuck you guys, though, seriously."

"Kenny, did you even eat anything?" Kyle asks. Kenny has been sipping from a huge cup of coffee, staring straight ahead and letting Kyle control the song choices. "Here, have some of my hash brown," he says.

"Can't eat," Kenny says.

"Why not?"

"I don't know, my stomach. Thanks, though."

Kyle glances into the backseat and meets Stan's eyes. Stan shrugs. Kyle can't remember the last time he saw Stan like this, dirt covered and ravenous, chewing with his mouth open. He wants to take a picture.

"Dude, calm down," Stan says, nudging the back of Kenny's seat. "It's not like the Phoenix airport is known for its packs of wild dogs. Butters is fine."

Kenny makes a vague noise of disagreement. Kyle actually thinks Stan is wrong about that, too. Stan disconnected from his parents around the time of their divorce, and even before then, he never feared their disapproval very much. Kyle can relate to Butters, though his parents were never emotionally abusive. They were controlling, and demanding, and Kyle still feels like shit when he disappoints them. Butters fears his parents about a hundred times more than Kyle does, and he's got to be terrified, afraid that he's failed them, that they hate him, and that he's alone in the world now. Kyle wipes his greasy fingers on his jeans, regretting the McDonalds already. He tries to choose upbeat songs that will calm Kenny down.

They cross the border into Arizona around one o'clock in the afternoon, and there's still six hours to go until they reach Phoenix, though with the way Kenny is driving they might make it there in five. Kyle is in and out of sleep, too dirty to get comfortable. He can feel the dirt under his nails, and the putrid smell of Cartman's puke is so strong that he feels like he can taste it. There's still some of it smeared on Stan's jeans, though he tried to clean it off as best he could with McDonald's napkins.

Kyle fidgets in his seat, fools with the radio, and moans unhappily when he sees that only ten minutes have passed since he last checked the clock. Stan and Cartman are both asleep in the backseat, Cartman snoring and Stan curled up against the window, one of Kenny's sweatshirts balled up under his head. Kyle looks over at Kenny. He's got both hands on the wheel and he's leaning forward slightly, as if doing so will get them to Phoenix faster.

"Dude, Butters is gonna be okay," Kyle says. Kenny grunts.

"I don't know what the fuck's going to happen," he says.

"Things are going to work out, you'll see."

"Are they, Kyle? Butters doesn't have any money. He won't be able to go to college without his parents paying his way. He's got no place to live."

"Dude, his parents will take him back. They all just need to cool down for awhile."

"Yeah, for like, three years. That's what it would take for him to even have a chance of really getting out from under their bullshit. You know they tell him he's stupid? That no worthwhile company would ever hire someone who forgets to clean out the lint trap on the dryer? They tell him he's going to end up collecting garbage for a living if he doesn't start paying more attention to his responsibilities. They work him to the fucking bone, and it's never enough. His hands are like a factory worker's, like a kid who's been doing slave labor since he was six."

"Dude, calm down," Kyle says. "I know they're hard on him -"

"You don't know, Kyle! You think you can relate just because your parents expect you to make A's? Because they want you home by midnight? Everything that goes on in that house is a test. They think it will make him work harder, that it'll make him more successful or pure-hearted or some shit. Like he could be any more pure-hearted, Jesus Christ. But they're not just chores, they're mind games. They once made him dig a hole in the backyard as punishment for breaking a plate when he was drying the dishes. He had to dig until it was too deep for him to climb out. Then he had to spend the night down in the hole and think about what he'd done."

"Fuck," Kyle says. He feels the McDonalds threatening to lurch back up his throat. "That's not - are you sure that's true?"

"Yeah, Kyle, who the fuck do you think found him in the hole and got him the fuck out of there? After about two hours of negotiation. He cries and shakes like a motherfucker just at

the *thought* of disobeying them. It's child abuse, and nobody in that town ever noticed him enough to give a shit. Not even you guys."

"Kenny," Kyle says. He still feels sick to his stomach, though the urge to vomit has passed. "We noticed -"

"I'm not talking about me." Kenny is glaring at the road, his knuckles going white around the steering wheel. "This isn't some goddamn metaphor."

"I know. That's not - do you want me to drive for awhile?"

"No. I've got it."

Kyle presses his lips together and stares out the window, at the cacti that have begun to appear along the side of the road. There are more cars on the highway now, Kenny weaving in and out of them as he races toward Phoenix.

"Why didn't you tell someone?" Kyle asks. "Why didn't you tell me? We might have done something to help him."

"Please," Kenny says. "They just would have coached him into denying everything. Actually, fuck that, he wouldn't even need to be coached. He protects them. He doesn't know anything else. He wants them to love him, and they tell him all the time that it's conditional."

Kyle doesn't know what to say. He picks at the left knee of his jeans, the denim there beginning to fray.

"I guess Stan told you everything," Kenny says, muttering.

"Um," Kyle says.

"Yeah. That's what I thought. Whatever, I knew he'd tell you. Or, I was drunk and didn't give a shit, I guess. I just want to help him now. For years all I did was take from him. Food, comfort, even money. I hated getting handouts from you guys, but with Butters it was like it didn't count. I treated him like shit, just like his parents did."

"Kenny." Kyle sighs and checks the backseat. Cartman is still honking out disgusting snore-bursts, and Stan hasn't moved from his position against the window.

"At first I was just being nice to him because I felt sorry for him," Kenny says. "I mean, I'm not stupid. I knew he had a crush on me. I'd used it to my advantage for so long, I figured I owed him some affection. But you can't fake affection for Butters. At least, I couldn't. It means too much to him. It started being the best part of my day, then it was the thing I was fucking living for, because I was making him happy, and he deserves it so much, Kyle, Jesus Christ."

Kenny's voice is steady, but he's pushing gas pedal down even harder, the speedometer trembling close to ninety-five miles per hour.

"Dude, be careful," Kyle says. "I'm only going to forgive you for almost killing me once, okay?"

Kenny smiles, his eyes still on the road. "So you forgive me? For real?"

"Yeah." Kyle groans. "I know what it's like to want to physically attack Cartman at any cost."

"It was literally like my mind was wiped clear of everything else," Kenny says. He groans. "Except, you know. That I have to get to Butters, like. Now."

"He's stronger than you think, dude. He made it through all those years with his parents."

"Yeah, and now he's left them. You guys don't know. Pleasing them is a big part of his identity. When they found me in his room - shit."

"Oh, God." Kyle winces. "You weren't in the middle of something, were you?"

"No, but we had been about an hour earlier. There was nakedness, dude. Cuddling. Come stains."

"Fuck." Kyle gets hot under his t-shirt and checks the backseat again. No sign of consciousness from either Cartman or Stan. "Um, so." He fidgets. "You're, like. Gay? Or just gay for Butters?"

"Eh, I don't know. Did I ever tell you guys that in eighth grade I let Clyde blow me?"

"*What?*" Kyle flails as quietly as possible. "Clyde? Fucking - *Clyde*?"

"Yeah, I know. Not my finest hour. But we were fucked up and he wanted to try it. He went through his whole gay angst thing afterward. I'm pretty sure he's like ninety percent straight, but man did he overcompensate for the rest of high school, shit. I never really had that crisis thing. Dicks, pussies, whatever. All I know is that Butters is the only person I've ever been willing to drive nine hours through the desert for. You know?"

Kyle looks out the window, though there's still nothing to see, just cacti and sagebrush.

"Don't ask me if I know," he says.

"I'm not stupid," Kenny says. "I know you know."

Kyle realizes then that they're not listening to any music. He hurries to put some on, and Kenny lets the subject die. Kyle tries to catch sight of Stan in the side view mirror, but he's sitting diagonal to the passenger seat, and Kyle can only see his shoulder. He wonders if this is what living across the country from Stan will feel like: being able to glimpse only a small part of him, a slightly distorted reflection, whatever contact Kyle is able to make with him just a reminder of how far away he is.

Cartman wakes up an hour later and starts complaining about lunch. Kyle has no appetite, and can only think about a searing hot shower, perfect little hotel soaps wrapped in plastic,

fluffy white towels. Stan blinks awake to the sound of Cartman's complaining and rubs his hands over his eyes.

"Where are we?" Stan asks.

"Getting close to the Grand Canyon," Kyle says. He keeps seeing the signs.

"Dude, seriously?" Stan says. "We should - I mean if we're gonna stop for lunch anyway -"

"It's not like there's an Arby's on the rim of the canyon," Kyle says. "I've been there before, with my parents - they charge you like forty bucks a car to get into the park, it's this whole thing."

"So, what, you're on Kenny's side now?" Cartman says. "I don't care if the next Arby's we see is at the goddamn mouth of hell, we're stopping."

"Fine," Kenny says. "Whenever you guys start seeing fast food sign, just tell me which one you want to stop at."

"It's been awhile since we've seen any, though," Kyle says. Cartman groans.

"What is this fag music we're listening to, in the meantime?" he asks.

"The Cure," Kenny says. Cartman snorts.

"Jesus Christ."

"You can pick the music when you drive." Kenny's hands are so tight around the wheel that Kyle is afraid the skin over his knuckles is going to split.

"Fine," Cartman says. "Let me drive, then."

"No. I'm driving until we get to Phoenix."

Kenny is starting to look dangerous again, so nobody argues with him. Kyle wishes he was in the back, his head on Stan's thigh. Then he remembers the puke on Stan's jeans and reconsiders.

Only when they're getting close to Flagstaff do they start seeing signs for recognizable eating establishments. They stop at a Taco Bell, and Kyle gets what he considers to be the only safe thing on the menu: a meatless quesadilla. The smell of Cartman's and Stan's food makes him feel like he's swimming in a vat of oily ground beef anyway. Again, Kenny eats nothing, just orders an enormous Mountain Dew.

"You're going to faint," Kyle says.

"I'm fine," Kenny says. "It's only four more hours to Phoenix."

Everyone else groans at the reminder. Kyle is dying to stretch his legs, and his ass is beginning to get sore. He looks back at Stan, who gives him a tired smile.

"We'll do something fun in Phoenix," he says. "After we pick up Butters."

"And shower," Kyle says.

"Hell yes," Stan says.

"Aw, are you guys going to shower together?" Cartman asks. "How cute." He punctuates this with a poisonous Taco Bell fart that makes everyone groan and lift their t-shirts over their noses. Cartman laughs, delighted with himself.

"Damn," he says. "That was a good lunch."

"Fucking sick!" Kyle says. He rolls his window down and sticks his head out the window, coughing. Stan and Kenny do the same. Cartman just sits there looking pleased. Closing his eyes against the stinging desert wind, Kyle tries to cleanse his mind with a fantasy about showering with Stan. It's definitely one of his top three jerk off scenarios, so many of his favorite things in life combined: Stan's skin, his hands, his hair when it's wet, and the more day to day pleasures of hot water, soap, and the feeling of someone else's fingers digging in to wash his hair, something he only experiences in real life when he goes to the barber shop. It's not quite as thrilling when some crusty old guy is doing it, telling Kyle he's got a dry scalp while he does.

Kyle sleeps fitfully after lunch, waking up to saguaro cacti and the roar of a passing motorcycle gang. He closes his eyes again and thinks of what would happen if he ran away from school during his first semester and showed up at LAX, texted Stan with something like, *I'm here, please come*. Stan would come, confused and worried, but then what? Kyle would be a skinny eyesore among Stan's brawny friends, worse than he was in high school. People in South Park knew that Stan and Kyle came as a matched set, even though they didn't really match anymore. Out in the real world, they'd look ridiculous together. Maybe it's good that he's not going to UCLA. It would have been worse to grow apart while they still shared a zip code.

The sunlight is waning by the time they start seeing signs for Phoenix, and as they near the airport the clouds are backlit by brilliant orange. Kyle feels nervous. He wonders if Kenny will kiss Butters in front of him, in front of Stan - surely not in front of Cartman? The thunderous sound of planes taking off rattles him as they look for a parking space in the deck attached to the airport. Stan groans and stretches when he climbs out of the car, and Cartman takes his time, brushing taco shell bits from his pants. Without a word to any of them, Kenny bolts for the main entrance to the terminal. Kyle sighs and runs after him.

"Wait up!" Stan calls. Kyle turns and waves him forward. Cartman is still puttering around near the car.

"Kenny!" Kyle shouts, but he's deaf to them already, taxis slamming on their brakes to keep from hitting him as he runs through the loading zone. Horns blare, but Kenny just keeps going, oblivious. Stan catches up to Kyle and they cross the street together, keeping their eyes on Kenny.

"This is crazy," Stan says. He's grinning. "It's like a movie."

"Oh, Jesus. Are you enjoying this?" The idea that he could be makes Kyle blush.

"Kind of." Stan elbows him. "Our little Kenny's all grown up."

"Dude, Kenny's been grown up for a long time. He got a BJ when he was nine."

"I know, but this is different. He's all, like. In love and stuff."

"Now you're getting romantic about this, really? Kenny and Butters?"

"I don't know. I've just never seen Kenny like this. Have you?"

"Fuck no," Kyle says. "It's kind of freaking me out." Stan was asleep during Kenny's rant about how Butters deserves to be happy. Kyle will have to tell him about it later, when they're freshly showered and sharing a hotel bed. He beams when he thinks about how close they are to having that, and to sleeping on a mattress instead of a forest floor.

The airport is busier than Kyle anticipated, crowded and chaotic. He'd pictured a mostly empty lounge, Butters sitting miserable and alone while a guy buffed the floors. They're crashing into people as they try to follow Kenny through the baggage area, luggage carts making it into a kind of maze. Kenny stops near a bank of pay phones and looks around, dragging his hands through his hair.

"Maybe we should have him paged," Stan says. All three of them are breathless, turning in circles and finding no sign of Butters.

"If he went back," Kenny says, shaking his head, "If he chickened out -"

"There he is!" Kyle grins when he sees Butters sitting near the windows, bent over with his elbows on his knees, his left heel jiggling as he stares down at the carpet. Kenny dashes toward him, vaulting over a huge duffel bag that someone has dumped near one of the carousels. Stan and Kyle follow. Butters looks up when he hears Kenny's footsteps, his eyes going huge.

"Kenny!" Butters exhales his name like it's a breath he's been holding for nine hours. He leaps out of his seat and runs to Kenny, who says nothing, just grabs him and squeezes him so hard that Kyle can feel it in his own ribs. Kyle looks over at Stan, who's watching them, grinning.

"You came," Butters says, over and over, his voice muffled against Kenny's shoulder, both hands fisted in the back of Kenny's shirt. "You came, oh Jesus, oh God, you came."

"Of course I fucking came," Kenny says. He pulls back and cups Butters' face in his hands, tilting it up toward his. Butters is teary-eyed but beaming, and Kyle can't believe he never noticed the way Butters looks at Kenny before.

"That fella who let me use his phone," Butters says, sniffling. "He was nice and all, but he had a flight to catch, so I wasn't sure if you sent a response or nothing." He peeks around Kenny's shoulder and smiles at Kyle and Stan.

"Are you okay?" Kenny asks. He's examining Butters the way Stan did after the crash, turning his face this way and that as if he's looking for fading bruises.

"I'm okay now," Butters says. His eye catches something in the distance, and he laughs. Kyle and Stan turn to see Cartman lumbering toward them. He's got a half-eaten soft pretzel in one hand and a soda in the other.

"You guys, seriously," Cartman says, panting. "What the fuck? Oh - hey, Butters."

"Hey, Eric," Butters says. "You came, too, huh?"

"As a conscientious objector," Cartman says, mouth full of pretzel. "Good job ditching your parents, though."

Kenny gives Cartman a deadly look. Butters wilts a little, still tucked against Kenny's chest. If Kenny doesn't let him go soon, Cartman is going to start making jokes. Kyle walks over to pull Butters out of Kenny's arms. Butters comes willingly, and gives Kyle a hug that squeezes the breath from him.

"Thanks for coming, you guys," Butters says. "I knew I could count on you."

"It's no problem," Stan says, taking his turn to hug Butters. "How'd you get the money for the plane, anyway?"

"Oh, you'll never believe it!" Butters says. "It was your girlfriend! Wendy said she thought I looked terrible at graduation, and she came over to the house to cheer me up. I was supposed to be grounded, but she was the valedictorian, so my parents thought she'd be a good influence. Joke's on them, I guess." Butters rubs his fists together. "She gave me three hundred dollars and told me to get the heck out of there."

"Oh, Jesus," Stan says. He palms his back pocket. "No wonder I have like eighty missed calls from her."

"Wendy was able to convince you to leave?" Kenny says. "Really, in one afternoon? I've been telling you to get out of there for years."

"I know, Kenny." Butters turns pink and glances at Cartman, but he's more interested in his pretzel than this conversation. "It's just, well. I thought I could do it, but then you were gone, and everything was just terrible." He moans and throws his arms around Kenny again, pinching his eyes shut against Kenny's chest. Cartman pauses in mid-chew, frowning.

"Wait, are you guys fags for real?" he asks, his mouth full of pretzel.

"You are fucking begging to get your ass kicked," Kenny says.

"It's a legitimate question!"

"I'm gonna call Wendy and let her know you're safe," Stan says, already dialing. He wanders off with his phone. Kyle turns back to Butters and Kenny, who are both looking at Cartman, Butters blushing furiously and Kenny staring at him in warning, daring him to ask again.

"So, like." Cartman glances at Kyle. "Are we gonna eat dinner here at the airport, or -?"

"First of all, I don't know if you noticed, but you're *already eating something*," Kyle says, gesturing to the pretzel. "And secondly, hell no, we're not eating here. If I don't get in a shower in less than twenty minutes I'm going to kill all of you."

"We're going to get a hotel room here tonight," Kenny says to Butters. "Then, tomorrow, we're going to Vegas."

"Oh, Vegas." Butters smiles up at him. "Like we always talked about."

"Shit, are you guys going to get gay married there or something?" Cartman asks, groaning.

"Is it legal?" Kenny asks, hopefully. Kyle snorts.

"I don't think so," he says. "Let's walk back to the car, okay? Stan can talk to Wendy while I drive."

He doesn't really expect Stan's phone call with Wendy to last throughout their trip to the hotel, but it does, complete with doofy laughter and Stan telling her what a great person she is, to have helped Butters this way. Kyle doesn't disagree - Wendy is great, she's *great* - but by the time they find a decent looking hotel in outside of the city he's less enthusiastic about taking a shower, since he feels like his skin has been stripped off. Butters is talking nonstop about his plane ride. Apparently a stewardess was mean, the lady next to him was nice, and they served little bags of pretzels instead of peanuts. Kenny is asleep with his head on Butters' shoulder, and Butters is stroking Kenny's hair despite Cartman's pointed stares, like he doesn't even know that he's doing it.

"Alright," Stan says when valets with shrill whistles are motioning the car up toward the hotel's front doors. "I gotta go, we're here. I love you, too. Okay. Bye."

Kyle's vision tunnels, and he almost runs over a bell boy. He thought he was over this jealousy shit. It's so pointless and predictable and such a waste of his fucking time. The others are talking as the valets struggle to figure out what items of luggage they want brought up and what to leave in the car. Kyle nods when spoken to, though all he can hear is Stan saying *I love you* to someone who isn't him. It's not as if it's anything new. He can never predict when it will hit him hard like this.

They get a double room on the seventeenth floor, and their request for a rollaway bed is shot down. There's a convention in town, all the rollaway beds spoken for. Kenny and Butters claim one of the beds by dropping into it and snuggling up together to watch TV, and Cartman asks Kyle and Stan to pick a number.

"Whoever guesses closest to my number will get to share the other bed with me," he says. Stan snorts.

"Yeah, that's fair. How come you're automatically in the bed? Let's flip a coin."

"It's fine," Kyle says, already heading for the bathroom with a clean pair of clothes tucked under his arm. "I'll sleep on the floor, I don't care."

"Kyle -"

"I said it's fine, Stan, just fucking leave it."

He closes the bathroom door hard, aware that he's being an idiot. He won't be able to explain the change in his mood, and everyone out there probably knows Stan's phone call with Wendy is to blame, anyway. He's sweating as he undresses, thinking about this. Will they talk about him? *What the hell's wrong with Kyle, why is he such a bitch, what does he expect from you, Stan?* Kyle's teeth are gritted by the time he climbs under the hot water, and he can't really enjoy it the way he'd hoped to. He scrubs his skin until it's raw and claws his fingernails into the soap to clean the dirt from beneath them, his nail beds stinging. He wanted to linger under the water, to think about Stan - how he'll come in here when Kyle is done and rub his soapy hands all over himself, stroke his cock, make soft noises that the blast of the shower will hide - but now it's just too pathetic. Stan will be thinking about Wendy, not even needing to stretch his fantasies very far, because he knows what it's like to have her skin pressed against his, her lips on his neck, his hand between her legs. Kyle slaps the shower off, dizzy with anger that he knows he hasn't earned. Stan never promised him anything.

"I'm gonna go get the sleeping bag from the car," he says as he walks out of the bathroom, dressed, steam puffing out behind him. He steps into his shoes, not making eye contact with any of them. Stan is staring at him in that fucking cloying goddamn way that he does when he pretends not to know why Kyle is acting like a dick, Cartman is hurrying to claim the bathroom and Butters and Kenny are ignoring the TV in favor of whispering together, their heads on the same pillow. Only when Kyle has left the room does he realize that he doesn't have a key for the room. He heads for the elevators anyway, more interested in getting away from all of them than how he'll get back in.

He wanders the lobby before heading toward the valet stand. The hotel is big, technically a resort, about twenty minutes from the airport. Convention attendees are crowded around the lobby bar, dressed in business casual douche-wear and laughing over drinks. Kyle walks to the back of the lobby and peeks out at the pool, trying to feel less hateful. Wendy did a good thing for Butters, and in a lot of ways, Kyle loves her, too. She's always been understanding about his friendship with Stan, allowing them time alone together. He thinks of the look she gave him during her graduation address. Maybe she's a little too fucking understanding. Condescending, even. Pitying. Kyle feels like kicking something, his anger ratcheting back up like a thermometer that's ready to burst, swelling between his ears. Once he gets like this, there's nothing to do but sleep it off. Last year, when Kyle punched a hole in his bedroom door over a smart ass comment his brother made to him at the dinner table, his parents made him go to anger management counseling. He was able to bluff his way through two sessions with a therapist and convince everyone involved that he doesn't really have a problem. It's his fucking business if he wants to get angry and grind his teeth away at night. Nobody's going to be able to talk him out of feeling this way.

He retrieves the sleeping bag and returns to the room, his mood even worse than it was when he left. It doesn't help that Stan is freshly showered and treating Kyle the way he always does

when Kyle starts to seethe, like he's a grenade that must be handled with care. Kyle unrolls the sleeping bag near the window and swipes one of the pillows from the bed.

"What are you doing?" Stan asks. "We're about to go to dinner. I saw a Chili's on the way in, I thought -"

"You guys go," Kyle says. He stretches out on the sleeping bag and rolls toward the wall. "I'm not hungry."

Silence. The shower is running, and Kyle can hear Butters humming to himself from inside the bathroom. Cartman is splayed out on the bed he'll share with Stan, probably trying to formulate the perfect insult to send Kyle over the fucking edge. Kenny is on the other bed, pitying him. Kyle wouldn't be able to sit through dinner with them without throwing a drink in someone's face.

"Kyle," Stan says.

"Leave him alone," Kenny says. The bed springs squeak. "He's tired. I'm gonna go have a smoke, I'll meet you guys downstairs."

The door to the room opens and shuts. Out in the hallway, Kyle can hear the elevator bell ding. He's so tense that his jaw aches. Stan is standing in the middle of the room and staring at him like a perfect idiot; Kyle can feel it. Cartman seems to be at a loss. Commentary on this particular situation is probably just too easy to bother with. In the bathroom, the water shuts off. Butters is still humming like he's singing a song about being able to sleep in Kenny's arms tonight. He doesn't even need lyrics.

"So, uh," Stan says to Cartman. "Is Chili's okay with you?"

"Yeah, sure, whatever," Cartman says. He sounds a little moody himself. "Just tell Butters to hurry up and finish powdering his fucking nose in there."

"Give him a second, dude. He's been in an airport for like, twelve hours."

"Is Kenny seriously hitting that?" Cartman asks.

"What do you think, dumb ass? Don't give him a hard time about it, he's been through enough. And Kenny might for real kill you in your sleep if you keep dogging him."

"I'm not saying shit. It's not funny anymore, just sickening. If they try to fuck while we're in the room -"

"They won't! Goddammit, Cartman, shut up."

The bathroom door opens, and Butters comes out, still humming. Kyle can picture him clearly: rubbing a towel through his almost neon-blond hair, smiling around the room obliviously.

"Where's Kenny?" Butters asks, a hint of distress in the question.

"He's waiting for us downstairs, he wanted a smoke," Stan says. "Ready to go to dinner?"

"Yeah! I, uh, I don't have any money, though. I had two dollars left after I bought the plane ticket, but I spent it on a donut at the airport."

"That's okay, I'll cover you," Stan says. "Or Kenny will. C'mon, let's go, I need a real meal. Kyle, are you sure you don't want to come?"

"I'm sure."

"What's the matter with Kyle?" Butters asks. The question is so puppyish that Kyle laughs.

"He's fine," Stan says. "He's just tired. Dude, don't you at least want us to bring you something?"

"I said I'm not hungry."

"Stan, you heard Kenny, leave the bitch alone." The bed groans as Cartman climbs off of it. "C'mon, assholes. Those baby back ribs aren't going to eat themselves."

Somebody pulls open the door, and Butters starts talking excitedly about what he might order, his voice disappearing out into the hallway, Cartman's grumbling complaints trailing after him. Stan heaves a dramatic sigh before following them out. The door closes, the elevator bell dings, and they're gone.

Kyle rolls onto his back. The room is perfectly silent, unlike anything he's experienced since they left on this trip. There's always background music from the car stereo, Cartman's snoring, Stan's camera clicking, the wind against the car and the bugs in the trees. Here, there's just an empty drone. He tries to enjoy it, his rage on a low boil in the center of his chest now. Ike once suggested that he'd get a lot out of meditation. Kyle tried it, but he couldn't turn his mind off, just sat there feeling anxious about the fact that he wasn't relaxing properly. The whole concept of trying not to think about anything is idiotic to him, though he wishes it were possible.

He gets up and wanders the room, poking through everybody's stuff. Stan's dirty clothes are in a pile in the corner of the room, reeking. Kyle finds a dry cleaning bag in the closet and stuffs them into it, adding Kenny's and Butters' so that the gesture will seem less conspicuous. He throws Cartman's in, too, resenting the fact that he has to touch them. He hangs the bag on the doorknob and walks back into the empty room. Stan left his camera sitting on the bedside table. Kyle turns it on and flicks through his pictures; there aren't many from today, just a few shots of the desert from the windows of the car. There's one of Kyle from the night before, holding a fishing pole and smiling drunkenly. That night already feels like it took place about two years ago.

Bored and hungry, he stretches out on the sleeping bag again. He could order room service, but then his excuse about not wanting to go to dinner would be blown. Resentfully, he decides he wants to jerk off. Stan can shoot his load to thoughts of Wendy, that's fine, but Kyle isn't hurting anybody by thinking about Stan when he reaches into his pants. No one other than himself, anyway.

He closes his eyes and tries to come up with a good self-destructive fantasy. Those always make him come the hardest, with fluttery little moans that he can't contain in the quiet of his bedroom. In his fantasy, Stan is mad at him. More furious than Kyle has ever been about anything, which is saying something. He pushes Kyle down onto the bed - a hotel room bed, here or anywhere, doesn't matter - and tells him he's going to teach him a lesson. Kyle shouldn't be fantasizing about taking it up the ass - it's sick, stupid, degrading - and if Stan fucks him hard and raw he won't want it anymore. That's what Stan thinks, anyway. Kyle closes his fist more tightly around his cock, pumping himself, gritting his teeth. The Stan of his fantasies is ruthless and prone to dirty talk, calling Kyle a slut and pulling his ass cheeks open wider to get a better view as he impales him. He comes all over Kyle's back, and Kyle comes in his hand, whimpering, imagining he can feel the heat of Stan's seed on his skin, branding him across his back in long stripes.

When it's over, Kyle's cock softening against his belly, come stains cooling on the sock that he used to catch the evidence, his fantasy flips around completely. Cruel, homophobic Stan evaporates. He's replaced by Kyle's best friend, the real Stan, who cradles him and praises him, saying, *God, Kyle, that was so good*, like Kyle just did a back flip off the diving board at the pool. Kyle rolls onto his side and hugs his pillow, imagining Stan's hands soothing through his hair, Stan kissing Kyle's forehead and whispering against his skin, *love you, so much, God, dude*. Unable to fool himself, Kyle falls asleep, perfectly aware that he's hugging a pillow.

He wakes up scared, not sure where he is. There's whispering, footsteps, and all he can see for a few seconds is a section of coral pink carpet. He remembers where he is when he hears Butters' voice.

"But I don't have any swim trunks!"

"What, you didn't pack your bikini in your running away from home bag?" Cartman says, not whispering.

"Shut up! Kyle's sleeping." That's Stan, of course. Perpetual protector of Kyle's rest.

"I didn't pack anything," Butters says. "I just kinda walked out."

"Well, that was brilliant. I guess you're poorer than Kenny now. Congratulations."

"Shut up," Kenny says. "Kyle has a swimsuit, Butters. You can borrow it."

"I don't think he'd like that," Stan says.

"Why not? They're about the same size."

"I just don't think he'd want Butters' junk all up in his swimsuit. You know how Kyle is."

Kyle wants to be mad about this comment, remnants of the rage still hanging around, but he's grinning against the pillow, glad that his back is turned on the room so that his cover won't be blown.

"Fine, then loan him your swimsuit," Kenny says. Stan groans.

"Alright," he says. Kyle hears a bag unzipping. "Just to save you from the wrath of Kyle."

"Thanks, Stan!" Butters says. "You're the best." The bathroom door opens and shuts.

"You'd better not, uh, arouse him while he's wearing my suit," Stan says to Kenny.

"Aw, sick!" Cartman shouts. "I just ate!"

"I said shut up, you're gonna wake Kyle!" Stan says in a hissed whisper. Cartman scoffs.

"Like I give a shit. Kenny, what the fuck are you doing?"

"Changing into my bathing suit."

"Aw - aw!" There are more muffled protests from under the blankets on the bed.

"It's not like you've never seen Kenny's ass before," Stan says.

"Are you sure you don't want to come with us?" Kenny asks, ignoring Cartman as he continues to gag as if he's dying from the sight of Kenny's nudity.

"Well, I can't, now," Stan says. "Butters is using my suit."

"You could use Kyle's. He wouldn't care, you know. If it was your junk."

"Fuck you. Anyway, it's too small, and - I told you, I don't want to swim! Quit looking at me like that."

Butters and Kenny leave for the pool a few minutes later, Butters chattering away about the games of sharks and minnows they all used to play together as kids. Stan putters around the room when they're gone, brushing his teeth, fucking with his phone. Kyle stays perfectly still inside the sleeping bag, until he hears Cartman start to snore and Stan slipping into the bathroom for a piss. Kyle takes the opportunity to tuck his cock into his sweatpants, doing so as quietly as possible. He whips the come-crusted sock under the bed, enjoying the idea that Cartman would be disgusted if he knew it was there.

By the time Stan emerges from the bathroom, Kyle is back in position, rolled toward the wall and pretending to sleep. He hears Stan's jeans drop to the floor, heavy with the weight of his wallet, this particular nighttime noise familiar to him from countless sleepovers. Kyle always seems to get into bed first. He stays perfectly still, listening to Stan climb into the bed with Cartman, whose snoring is quiet and steady now, as if he's settled into a pleasant dream about Taco Bell.

"Move over, asshole," Stan whispers, but Cartman just goes on snoring. Stan groans, and the bed creaks when he settles down onto it. For one oddly vivid moment Kyle is sure that Stan knows he's awake, but it passes, and he hears Stan breathing in soft sighs the way he does when he's asleep.

Kyle drifts off again, into a dream about Stan trying to wear his swim shorts, blushing when they hug his ass too tightly and do nothing to conceal the bulge of his cock. It's not an erotic dream; Kyle is stressed about this, on Stan's behalf. He finds a towel and wraps it around Stan's waist, restoring his modesty. Stan smiles down at Kyle, strokes his cheek, and Kyle thinks he's going to get kissed, but Stan just lifts his camera and takes a picture.

He wakes again when Butters and Kenny return to the room, but it feels like another dream to him: the two of them laughing and shushing each other, wet swim shorts slapping against the back of the room's desk chair, the smell of chlorine. Kyle falls asleep before they go quiet, to the sound of one of them whispering to the other, very softly, *c'mere*.

The room is still pitch dark when he wakes up, and he's cold. Someone has lifted off his blanket, but it's not a blanket, it's Stan's sleeping bag, and someone is climbing in behind him though there's only room for one. Kyle moans and twitches, wanting to cry out for Stan, but Stan touches his hip and whispers *shh* into his ear before he can.

"It's just me," he whispers. He settles in behind Kyle, pressed up against his back, spooning him shamelessly. His breath smells like Kenny's booze, thinly masked by toothpaste.

"Mmph?" Kyle says, turning his head on the pillow, though he still can't see anything. Stan's nose bumps his cheek; his breath is hot.

"Cartman's hogging the whole bed," he whispers. The volume of his voice makes Kyle shudder, or maybe it's the flimsiness of his excuse. Kyle presses his ass back against Stan's hips, drowsy enough to want to test him. Stan doesn't balk, only slides his hand from Kyle's hip and across his chest, tucking his arm around him. Kyle wills himself to wake up, to appreciate what's happening, but he's so tired, and afraid this is only a dream. If it is, he wants to live in it for as long as he can. He closes his eyes and settles down against the pillow again, sucking in a deep breath to match the one that Stan is taking. He exhales when Stan does, Stan's stomach softening against his back, his arm growing heavier over Kyle's side. In paradise, floating, Kyle is still greedy: he slides his hand over Stan's inside the sleeping bag.

"Kyle?" Stan whispers just as Kyle has decided that it must be a dream, and that he's okay with that, as long as he gets to keep feeling warm like this.

"Hmm?"

"In the car. This morning." Stan's voice is small, which is ironic, because he feels so big right now, wrapped all the way around Kyle. "I thought. For a minute, I thought -"

"I know." Kyle didn't mean to cut him off, but he barely understands where he is right now. "Me too."

Stan moans like some part of him is still scared, waiting to tumble over that cliff. He threads his fingers through Kyle's and pulls both their hands to Kyle's chest, squeezing him in close. Kyle falls asleep with Stan's breath hot against his neck. It's happened before, but it's never felt like something that might matter in the morning. In Kyle's dreams he dissolves completely into Stan, like sugar into hot coffee. It happens over and over again, and feels good every time.

Morning seems to come in minutes, and Kyle blinks against the pale glow of dawn, just faintly visible from beneath the room's curtains. He puts his hope in stasis as he takes stock of reality, but there's no need: Stan is still hugged tightly around him, his face buried against Kyle's shoulder now, knees tucked in behind Kyle's. Across the room, someone is whispering, giggling, and Kyle is afraid they've been caught by strangers who won't understand, but it's just Kenny and Butters fooling around in their bed, their voices muffled by blankets. Pinpricks of concern start to coat Kyle's skin like bug bites, making the hair on his arms stand up: Cartman is in the room, California is only two days away, and Stan is going to have to let got of him eventually. They're going to have to look each other in the eyes again soon, and it's highly possible that Stan will do what he did on that camping trip: sit up, yawn, and announce that they should probably get moving.

Kyle tries to sleep again, and when he can't, he blocks out the sound of Kenny and Butters' giddy whispering and concentrates on how it feels to be held. Last time he was zipped into a sleeping bag with Stan they were both afraid they were going to freeze to death, and Kyle could only appreciate the details in hindsight. Now, he's careful to keep still and take stock of everything: a spot of drool on the neck of his t-shirt, the slow in-and-out of Stan's breath against his back, the way Stan's fingers have loosened around his without releasing them. Stan's heartbeat, the heat of his thighs, the way his bangs tickle the back of Kyle's neck. Kyle tries to match Stan's breathing, wants to dissolve into him again.

"Shh!" Butters says from across the room, giggling.

"Come on," Kenny says. Blankets are shuffled, the bed creaks.

"Kenny!"

"Shh! C'mere."

They creep into the bathroom together and shut the door. There's more whispering, then the shower comes on, mercifully cloaking any further noise. Kyle wiggles his ass back involuntarily, hating himself for it even as the feeling melts its way down his spine. Stan moans but doesn't wake, his fingers twitching around Kyle's. There's a loud *bump* from the bathroom, like someone's knee running into the wall, then a peel of laughter. Cartman snorts in his sleep and rolls over, muttering to himself. Kyle is frozen, afraid to breathe. He takes a moment to consider how terrible it would be for Stan to wake to a blaring interrogation from Cartman, but still can't bring himself to end this.

There's a set of faint but distinct noises coming from the bathroom, a thump followed by something high-pitched and desperate, like a mouse who is taking sinful pleasure in being stepped on. Butters getting fucked, almost definitely. Kyle flushes with a combination of rage and embarrassment. Those two can have each other whenever they want, and they're going to walk all over his moment anyway. Stan is still heavy with sleep, but Cartman is beginning to grunt like a hibernating bear that's being poked with a stick. The pace of the thumping picks up, and suddenly Butters is having a screaming orgasm, some combination of a primal shout and Kenny's name echoing against the shower tiles like a wake up call. Cartman bolts upright with an angry snort, and Stan jerks awake, his eyelashes fluttering against the back of Kyle's neck.

Kyle sits up, throws a protective arm across Stan and turns to look at Cartman. He's frowning with confusion and actually looks a little bit terrified, like someone just clubbed him in the head. There's more squeaking from the bathroom, and then Kenny groans. Cartman looks over at the empty bed, and Kyle actually cringes as he watches realization sweep across his face.

“Oh, you're fucking kidding me,” Cartman says. “SICK!” He glowers at Kyle like this is all his fault. Stan is still groggy, slumped inside the sleeping bag and squinting up at Kyle, frowning. “And what the fuck is this?” Cartman asks, flinging his hands in their direction. “When the fuck did I check into a gay brothel?”

“You were kicking me,” Stan says to Cartman, sitting up. “What was I supposed to do, go get in their bed? God, they did seriously just – are they seriously?” He looks to Kyle for the answer. Kyle just stares at him, listless. Stan's leg is still pressed against his inside the sleeping bag, but he feels like a paper bag that's been crumpled and thrown over Stan's shoulder, purpose served.

“Yeah, I guess they're having mad gay sex in there,” Kyle says when Stan continues to stare at him, waiting for an answer. “Imagine that.”

“Fucking *gross*!” Cartman says. “Well, I'm not using that shower. I'm not even using the toilet in there, shit.”

In the bathroom, the shower shuts off. Kyle extracts himself from the sleeping bag. He's not sure where to go, hates having both Cartman and Stan's eyes on him, and is halfway to the bathroom when the door opens, steam pouring out around Kenny's shoulders. He's naked, whistling, a towel around his waist.

“Hey, guys,” he says.

“Kenny you sick fuck!” Cartman says. He whips a pillow at him. “Don't you have any goddamn respect for anything? We have ears, okay?”

“Oh, fuck off,” Kenny says, cheerfully. Butters pokes his head out of the bathroom behind him, his fist pressed over his mouth as he peers around the room. He's wearing one of Kenny's shirts, a towel wrapped around his waist. “Wait there, baby,” Kenny says, holding up a hand. “Cartman's being voyeuristic.”

“Dude, whatever,” Stan says. “You guys were, like. Exhibitionistic. Or whatever.” Stan is still in the sleeping bag, stretched out on his back again. Kyle is standing in the middle of the room, wondering why no one has noticed that he's got a dozen arrows sticking out of his chest, bleeding him dry.

“Sorry if we woke you fellas up,” Butters says, his voice tiny with embarrassment. Kenny waves his hand through the air and walks back to the bathroom, two pairs of boxer shorts clutched in his hand.

“Don't apologize to them,” Kenny says. “They loved it.”

“No, we didn't!” Cartman says, sputtering. He seems at a loss, as if he's going to start tearing chunks of his hair out from sheer exasperation.

“Could you be more of an asshole, Kenny?” Kyle says, afraid of the edge in his voice, though he doesn't want to soften it. Kenny turns in the doorway, frowns.

“Jesus, sorry,” he says. “It's not even that early –”

“You know, you're the most selfish person I've ever met in my fucking life?” Kyle says. The rage is back, worse and better than ever, making him ten feet tall, a solid column of fire. He can't look at Stan right now, and can't hurt anyone here as badly as he can hurt Kenny, needs to break something.

“What the fuck?” Kenny says. He doesn't even look angry yet. He glances at Stan, and that's all Kyle needs.

“You want to act like you've grown or changed or some stupid shit, because you're willing to pick Butters up at an airport?” Kyle scoffs. “Yeah, hi, hello – you're still getting your dick sucked, asshole. So keep acting like you know goddamn everything, but I'm tired of trying to make you feel better when all you ever do is whatever the fuck you want.”

“Kyle,” Stan says.

“No.” Kyle holds up a hand in Stan's direction, still can't look at him. “He almost fucking *killed us* yesterday, and now, yeah, we're supposed to laugh it off if Kenny wants to get laid while we're trying to have two minutes of fucking peace –”

“Hey, I'm sorry, okay –” Kenny says, narrowing his eyes like he doesn't mean it, not even a little.

“No, yeah, we're supposed to be glad.” Kyle laughs crazily, backing toward the door, ready to walk home shoeless. “Glad for whatever we can get, right?”

Kenny's eyes change, but he doesn't look sympathetic exactly. Butters peeks out from the bathroom again, chewing on his fingernails now.

“Kyle,” he says, sheepish, tiny. “I'm real sorry –”

“Yeah, you know what, so am I.” Kyle slams out of the room and walks toward the elevators, actually expects Stan to follow.

He doesn't.

Chapter 5

Kyle doesn't have anyplace to run to, so he ends up in the hotel lobby, sitting at a little table near the coffee bar. The air is pleasantly breakfast-scented, but he has no appetite, regret mixing uncomfortably with the anger that's still sloshing around in his stomach. He thinks of Butters' fear of disappointing people, the innocent trust in the way Stan wrapped around him last night, and of Kenny saying, *You know, Broflovski, you're like a mother to me*. None of it is fair, all of it is infuriating, but Kyle knows he has no right to blow up at any of them, least of all Kenny. He puts his head in his hands and listens to the sound of people ordering breakfast at the coffee bar. He's been there for almost twenty minutes by the time he hears a familiar lip smacking noise. He looks up at Cartman, not surprised to see that he's already procured food.

"These ham and cheese croissants are fucking sweet," Cartman says. "You should get one. They sell them right over there."

"I'm not hungry," Kyle says. He was prepared to gush out an apology to anyone who came, except Cartman. He thinks of Wendy's graduation speech and almost feels guilty, but Cartman asks for everything he gets and then some.

"So," Cartman says, chewing. He seems kind of nervous, something Kyle never thought he would see. "You're pissed at Kenny."

"Yeah," Kyle says, muttering. He's not. He's really mad at Stan for not kissing him, and has been since that camping trip when they got stranded, the morning when Kyle woke up in Stan's arms. It was the defining moment, when everything was either going to change completely or stay the same. Kyle can't hate Stan for wanting things to stay the same, but there's a lively ball of hate bouncing around inside him even so, splattering his insides with acid.

"I'm pissed at that fucker, too," Cartman says. He sits down across from Kyle at the table, and Kyle wants to tell him to get lost, but he could use some company right now, and everyone upstairs probably thinks he's a lunatic and an asshole. "Kenny's such a fucking dick. I really didn't think he'd have the nerve to sodomize Butters within fifty feet of us."

"He wasn't *sodomizing* him," Kyle says, though maybe that's the technical term. "They're in love. Not that you'd know anything about that."

"You think I've never been in love?" Cartman says. He peels some of the brown paper away from his croissant and takes a gigantic bite, staring at Kyle like he's daring him to answer.

"Um, no," Kyle says. "I think you'd just call anyone who said they were in love a fag. Even if they were in love with a girl."

"Well, it's faggy to say *I'm in love*," Cartman says, sputtering. "But all it means is you want to fuck someone so bad you feel like you're gonna die from it."

"Cartman, goddammit," Kyle says, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"What! You know I'm right. Okay, and sometimes, maybe, you also want to, like, let them sit in your lap while you debate politics, and make out with them in front of everyone after your football game, and eat Double Stuff Oreos with them in your, like, special secret way -"

"Jesus, Cartman." Kyle rears backward and stares at him, stunned. "Your idealized version of love would involve Double Stuff Oreos. Who the fuck are you talking about?"

"No one! Okay? Nobody! Just, this is theoretical, Kyle! God!"

"Alright, fine!"

They sit in silence for awhile, Cartman taking angry bites of his croissant and Kyle picking at his nail beds, trying to imagine the sort of person Cartman would fall in love with. Stan used to joke that Cartman loved Kyle because he was always on Kyle's case when they were kids, more interested in irritating him than anything else, but Kyle never got that impression. Cartman just focused on him because Kyle gave the best reactions. Stan and Kenny could always ignore him if they wanted to. Kyle was the one who exploded with fury no matter how many times he told himself not to let Cartman get to him.

"Do you think I have an anger management problem?" Kyle asks. Cartman rolls his eyes. He's finished his croissant, but there are still flaky bits of it stuck to his lips.

"I think you need to get laid, Kyle," he says. "Then you'd be less pissed off at everyone who has been."

"Fuck you! I know you're a virgin, so don't try to lie to me."

"Ha! A virgin, really? You look at this mound of manfulness across from you and assume he's a virgin? Yeah, right."

"Okay, whatever, but you've never had a real girlfriend." Cartman does have admirers, which Kyle finds disgusting, but they're all shrieking freshmen girls who put too much stock in his football playing abilities.

"High school girls are to be used and thrown away like tissues," Cartman says. "None of them are worthy of long term attention."

"Yeah? Then who've you been eating Double Stuffs with, asshole?"

Cartman doesn't blush, but his lip starts to twitch, nullifying his attempt to sneer dismissively at Kyle.

"I told you, dumb ass, it's nobody! That's just, like. My fantasy girl."

"Holy Christ, I never thought you'd say the words *fantasy girl*." Kyle considers this for a moment. "Unless it was in a pop song you were trying to take to the top of the charts."

"Whatever." Cartman is flustered, brushing croissant crumbs from his shirt. "At least I'm not in love with Stan."

"This conversation's over." Kyle stands from the table, and feels so suddenly dizzy that he loses his balance. Cartman reaches out to catch his arm before he can stumble over.

"Jesus, all I have to do is mention his name and you faint?" Cartman says. Kyle yanks free from his grip.

"It's just 'cause I haven't eaten in twelve hours," he says. "I feel like shit."

"Whose fault is that? Go get one of those ham and cheese croissants. You will not be disappointed."

"I don't have my wallet," Kyle says, grumbling. He rubs his palms over his eyes, wondering how he'll ever be able to show his face in that room. Kenny will be hurt and sulking, Butters will rub his fists together frantically enough to make his skin chafe, and Stan won't be able to look at him after the way he talked to Kenny, who is supposed to be their egg.

"C'mon, you cheap ass Jew," Cartman says, grabbing the back of Kyle's shirt when he tries to head toward the elevators. "I'm gonna buy another croissant, anyway. I'll get you one."

Kyle is speechless as he watches Cartman order and pay for two croissants. Cartman brings one to Kyle and hands it over, already digging his teeth into the other one. Kyle takes a cautious bite, half expecting something disgusting to ooze out of the golden pastry, an elaborate joke that Cartman set up with the breakfast bar attendant's help. The croissant is delicious as promised, only ham and melted cheese inside.

"See?" Cartman says. Kyle almost cries, not because he's moved but because this is a really bad sign about the state of his life. He's become so pathetic that even Cartman pities him. He eats more, his wariness increasing as Cartman's grin widens.

"What the fuck are you smiling about?" Kyle asks, worried.

"Heh," Cartman says. "I made you eat ham."

"You didn't *make me*. And I don't keep kosher, anyway. I had bacon yesterday."

Cartman looks thoughtful for a moment, chewing.

"Would Stan's dick be kosher?" he asks.

"Fuck you, fat ass!"

"No, I'm serious! How about his jizz? Are there rules for this?"

"I said I'm not - and it doesn't even - goddammit, Cartman!"

They ride back up the room together, Kyle glowering at the buttons on the elevator panel. He's so nervous about showing his face in that room that he's actually glad he doesn't have to

reenter it alone, even if that means having Cartman at his side.

"Did they send you down to get me?" Kyle asks as they walk to the room. "Or were you just looking for food?"

"Stan got down on his knees and begged me to save you," Cartman says. He snorts at the hopeful look on Kyle's face. "What do you think, ass master? I was hungry."

"Did they say anything?" Kyle asks. "After I left? Were they, like. 'Fuck Kyle?'" He hates having to ask Cartman about this, knowing there's an eighty percent chance he'll just tell Kyle what he doesn't want to hear, to piss him off. Cartman shrugs.

"Butters is the only one who said anything," Cartman says. "The little pussy was real worried about you. I was like, Jesus, Kyle does this all the time. What's the fucking difference?"

"I don't do this all the time." He stops outside the door to their room, listening for animated chatter from within, Kenny and Stan discussing his many failings while Butters tries to counter them out of politeness. There's no sound expect the faint drone of the television.

"What the hell are you worried about?" Cartman asks. He frowns and digs out his room key. "They always forgive you."

Cartman walks into the room and Kyle follows, preoccupied by what Cartman said only until his eyes meet Stan's. He's stretched out on the bed, dressed but still messy-haired, toying with the hem of his shirt. Kyle looks away from him, at Kenny, but he's staring at the TV like he hasn't noticed that Kyle has reentered the room. Butters is in his lap, his fists pressed together but motionless. He gives Kyle a sheepish smile, shoulders lifting.

"The dry cleaning came back," Stan says, gesturing to a pile of clothes wrapped in plastic, laid out on the end of the bed he's sitting on. It looks absurd, their t-shirts and jeans neatly pressed, given this royal treatment.

"What the hell is this?" Cartman asks, rifling through the pile until he finds his shirt and pants.

"I sent everything out last night while you guys were at dinner," Kyle says. "I didn't want the smell of your puke in the car for another day."

"Well, I'm not paying for it," Cartman says as he tears the plastic away from his jeans.

"My treat," Kyle says tightly. He tries to catch Kenny's eyes again, but Kenny is still stoic, watching some local news report, his arms locked across Butters' chest. Kyle can feel Stan watching him, but he doesn't look back. He slinks into the bathroom and takes another shower, cleaning all remnants of Stan's scent from his body. By the time he emerges, dressed and frizzy-haired, the others have packed up their things. Kyle stands in the bathroom doorway for a moment, waiting to be told that he's not welcome on the rest of the trip, that he'd better get a taxi back to the Phoenix airport.

"I packed your bag," Stan says, pointing. Kyle's backpack is on the bed, zipped shut. He stares at it for a moment, then looks at Stan, trying to apologize without speaking. It's worked before. Stan just looks tired, and a little afraid of him.

"Let's go," Kenny says. He's at the door, shouldering his bag. He reaches into his pocket, pulls out some crumbled bills and throws them onto the bed. "That's for you, Kyle," he says, still not looking at him. "For the dry cleaning."

"You don't have to -" Kyle says, mumbling, but Kenny is already walking out the door. Butters gives him a sympathetic look before following.

"Somebody's in the dog house!" Cartman says, smirking. "I guess that means Stan has to sit in the back with the gaywads, since me and Kyle are both feuding with Kenny at the moment."

"We're not feuding," Kyle says.

"Whatever, it's fine," Stan says. He heads for the door. "I'll sit in back with them. Cartman, you can drive."

"Sweet."

The drive from Phoenix to Las Vegas is five and a half hours long, and Kyle suffers every minute of the first two hours like another stone on top of his head, the weight getting heavier as the miles pass. Twice he has to chew on his knuckle to stop his eyes from watering. He can feel Kenny's resentment emanating from the backseat, burning against the back of his ear. Cartman blasts his usual obnoxious music, and Kyle lets him play whatever he wants, not in the mood to bicker with him. He chances only once glance into the backseat, assuming everyone back there is asleep. Stan is playing with his phone, and Butters is toying with the strings on Kenny's hoodie, singing along to Cartman's crappy music under his breath. Kenny is staring out the window, his arm around Butters and his elbow on the armrest, his fist curled over his mouth. Kyle turns back to stare out the windshield at the seemingly endless desert highway. He knows Cartman will pull over the second he sees a fast food sign, and when he does Kyle's stomach lurches, not at the thought of Del Taco but at the prospect of having to sit around a table with this awkwardness that he caused hanging over everyone.

He allows himself a moment to wonder if it's actually Stan who caused this, but that's not fair. Stan is just physically affectionate in a platonic way. They've always been different from other best friends, but it's never meant what Kyle wanted it to, not to Stan.

"Man, your car handles like shit," Cartman says to Stan as the five of them are walking into the Del Taco, Kyle hanging back. "It's like driving a fucking go cart."

"Yeah," Stan mutters. He doesn't seem to be listening. Kyle heads for the bathroom, not wanting to stand in line with them while they order. He wishes Kenny would scream at him, or at least call him a repressed asshole.

He's washing his face at the sink when the bathroom door opens and Stan slips inside. Kyle turns off the water and dries his face, hoping Stan won't just unzip at the urinals without a

word to him. Stan comes to the sink and stands in front of Kyle, staring at him so wearily that for a minute Kyle actually thinks Stan is going to hug him.

"What you said," Stan says, fidgeting. He takes a deep breath and stuffs his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "To Kenny-"

"I know, I'm sorry," Kyle says sharply. "I was just hungry and overtired. You woke me up - I couldn't sleep -"

He actually slept well, better than he has in weeks. He turns away from Stan, shaking. The rank, airless stench of the bathroom combined with the greasy aroma of Del Taco is making him sick, and he's not going to have a conversation about this here.

"You're mad at me," Stan says. "You have been since last night."

"No, I'm not. I'm just sick of this trip, okay? It didn't turn out the way I wanted it to."

"'Cause of Cartman? I don't think he's been that bad."

"Yeah, he's just ranting about how everyone's a fag all the time, it's really fun."

"Jesus, Kyle, he's not *serious*. You know how he is."

"Well, I guess it's serious now, since he was right about Butters and Kenny. Whatever, it's just - it's not Cartman. It's everything."

"I think you should apologize to Kenny," Stan says.

"Yeah? I think you should fuck off and stay out of it."

Kyle didn't mean to say that, and hates the sound of the words once they've left his mouth. Stan turns for the door. Kyle catches his arm, pulling him back.

"Sorry," Kyle says, trying to make his expression as pathetic as he feels. "I'm sorry, shit, I don't know what's wrong with me."

"Kyle," Stan says, broken-sounding, and then he does hug him. Kyle can't do this again, can't lose himself in the feeling of being held only to get dropped back to earth when Stan is finished with him. Still, he wraps his arms around Stan's back and closes his eyes against his shoulder, the smell of his shirt blocking out everything else.

"I want you to tell me what's wrong," Stan says.

"No, you don't." Kyle's voice is tiny. Stan releases him and steps back, still holding his shoulders. Kyle shakes his head. "I'm just hungry," he says, beating back the shake in his voice. Stan nods.

"So don't be a snob about fast food tacos," he says. He rubs Kyle's shoulders. "And don't be mad at Kenny. You forget - they don't have anyplace to go."

"That sounds kind of nice right now," Kyle says.

"You're stressed about college," Stan says. "I know. I am, too."

"I thought I was ready for everything to change, but it's like, the closer it gets, the more I'm not." He thinks of what Stan said that day at the lake. *Do you ever wish you were that age again?*

"I know," Stan says. He groans and pushes Kyle a little, making him stumble backward. "You asshole," he says, his voice getting tight. "Why didn't you just come to UCLA? You knew I couldn't turn down that scholarship -"

"I couldn't turn down mine, either!" Kyle says. "And you - you just expect me to follow you around forever? Is that it?"

"Forget it, just." Stan shakes his head and walks to the door. "I'm sorry, you're right, you should do whatever you want. I just thought you might want to come to college with me. *Fuck*, Kyle." He stands with his back to Kyle, his hand on the bathroom door. They both startle when it pushes open, almost smacking Stan in the forehead. A big guy in a flannel shirt walks in, giving them both a suspicious glance before heading toward the urinals. Stan walks out of the bathroom, motioning for Kyle to follow.

Stan pays for Kyle's tacos, and Kyle allows it, too listless to refuse. They join the others at an outdoor table. Cartman is talking about his truck, and only Butters appears to be listening. Kenny is eating, not taking his eyes off his taco.

"And it's got, like, these custom speakers," Cartman says, shredded iceberg lettuce dropping down into his lap. "Which were, like, designed by the studio that did the sound effects for Star Wars."

"Wow!" Butters is wide-eyed, clutching a chicken taco with both hands. "Really?"

"Yeah, it's pretty freaking sweet." Cartman looks at Stan and Kyle, then at Kenny. "So," he says. "Uh, Vegas. That'll be pretty awesome."

"Yeah!" Butters says. "Me and Kenny are gonna -"

"Don't jinx it," Kenny says, squeezing Butters' thigh.

"Oh, right! Well, anyway, I think it'll be pretty fun." He glances at Kyle and shrinks a bit, as if he's hearing Kyle's rant again in his head. "Uh, what do you guys think? Are you gonna gamble?"

"Really, Butters?" Cartman says. "You're asking a Jew if he's going to gamble?"

"Fuck off," Kyle says. "You're the one who said gambling was for -" He stops himself, feeling Kenny's eyes on him.

"Poor people," Kenny supplies. "Or was it white trash? Idiots?" He's staring at Kyle like he's the one who said these things.

"All of the above," Cartman says.

"So you're saying Jews are too smart to gamble," Kyle says, unable to deal with Kenny right now. "You're, like, complimenting Jews in the midst of being a stereotyping asshole. And anyway, I might gamble." He glances at Kenny. "I mean, that's part of the fun, right?"

"Yeah," Stan says. "We should play slots."

"Slots! Oh, God," Cartman says. "Don't be a pussy. If you're going to gamble, at least play blackjack."

Kenny gets up from the table, gathering the trash from his meal. He goes to throw it away, then lingers by the trash cans to light a cigarette. Kyle knows he should go over there and try to apologize, but he's terrified. He looks to Butters instead.

"Hey, I'm sorry I shouted at you guys this morning," Kyle says. "I was half-asleep. I'm kind of a dick when I first wake up. Just ask Stan," he says, elbowing him. Stan nods, his mouth full of food.

"Oh, that's alright, Kyle," Butters says. "Kenny's just a little mixed up right now. He doesn't want to go back to South Park without me, and I can't go back there."

"Why can't you go back?" Stan asks.

"Well - my parents would ground me!"

"You could live with Kenny," Kyle says.

"If you don't mind sleeping in a rat-infested crack den," Cartman says.

"I don't want to be a burden or nothing," Butters says. "And I couldn't live in South Park, not after leaving home the way I did. What if I ran into my dad at the grocery store?" He cringes at the thought. Stan reaches over to pat his back.

"You guys will figure it out," Stan says.

"Maybe we'll win a million dollars tonight in Vegas!" Butters says, brightening for a moment. He slaps his hand over his mouth, eyes widening. "Oh, hamburgers, did I just jinx it?"

"There's no such thing as a jinx," Kyle says. "But it's - you know it's a really, really long shot, right? The idea that you'd win anything more than, like, maybe a couple hundred bucks?"

"I know," Butters says. He grins. "I outscored you on our statistics final, remember?"

"Ah, yes," Kyle says. Stan snickers.

"It's just that I think the universe owes Kenny something really good! Don't you think? After everything he's been through?"

"Well, yeah," Stan says. "But that doesn't mean -"

"What if it's you, Butters?" Kyle says. He glances at Kenny to make sure he's still out of earshot. He's smoking, watching cars pass on the road.

"What now?" Butters says. He always looks so sad when he's confused, like a baby animal who can't find his mother.

"What if you're the good thing that Kenny deserves?" Kyle says. Cartman chokes on his taco meat, laughing, but Kyle ignores him.

"Oh - me?" Butters' cheeks turn pink. "No, I - I'm just another person he has to take care of. That's why I didn't want to leave, or make my parents mad so that they wouldn't pay for my college. Kenny said he'd help me out, but he helps his family already, and I didn't want to be another mouth to feed. And now I guess I am one," he says, moaning. He puts his head in his hands.

"Butters, it's okay," Stan says. "Kenny, um - oh." He stops talking when he sees Kenny walking to the table, a cigarette-scented cloud arriving along with him.

"Jesus, Kyle, what did you say to him now?" Kenny asks, going to Butters.

"I didn't say anything!"

"Oh, Kenny, don't be mad," Butters says, looking up. "It's my own fault, I got myself worked up -"

"Let's go," Kenny says. He hooks his hands under Butters arms and pulls him up from his seat. "I'm ready to fulfill my white trash destiny in the casinos."

"You know I don't think you're white trash!" Kyle says, narrowing his eyes at Kenny. "So quit looking at me like that."

"Oh, right, you just think I'm a freeloading loser."

"Guys!" Stan says. "Maybe you should go, like, have a talk -"

"I don't have anything to say," Kenny says. He's shepherding Butters toward the car. "Let's go. I'll drive. You two can sit in back with Cartman."

Kyle offers to sit in the middle seat, because he's the smallest and it's only fair. Stan shakes his head and takes that bullet himself, Cartman's girth brushing up against him. Kenny lets Butters pick the music, and Cartman complains at first, then seems to realize that Butters' taste in music isn't so different from his own. Butters sings along in his chirpy little voice, occasionally adding hand gestures that make Kyle think of Butters' time as a tap dancer. Periodically, Butters reaches over to touch Kenny's leg, and Kenny will answer by smoothing Butters' hair or rubbing his neck. Watching this, Kyle realizes he wasn't just taking his anger at the situation with Stan out on Kenny. He's jealous, too, not of Butters specifically but of both of them. Whatever else is going on in their lives, they're so at peace with each other.

None of them is able to sleep after the caffeine they had with lunch, though Kyle thinks Cartman is asleep for awhile, his forehead resting against the car window. At one point

Cartman sighs heavily, and Kyle looks over to see his eyes reflected in the window, drowsy but open, half-lidded. He wants to tell Stan about what Cartman said earlier about being in love. It's the kind of thing that can't wait, so weird that it requires Stan's immediate input. Kyle digs out his phone and starts typing a text. It will be like practice for their separation, baby steps: to begin, he'll try this while Stan is still beside him, the hair on his forearm tickling against Kyle's.

He hears Stan's phone buzz after he's sent the text and leans over to watch him read it.

Cartman is in love with somebody.

Stan snorts and smiles, keeping his eyes on his phone so that he won't give away their game, though no one is really paying attention. He composes an answer and sends.

wtf? is that code for something

He said love is wanting to fuck someone really bad, so maybe. But it seems kind of serious. He mentioned Oreos.

oreos? if this is some sick sex thing don't tell me

Not a sex thing. I don't know, look at him. He's pining?

Stan glances over at Cartman skeptically.

dude he's probably thinking about when he can eat next

Kyle barely withholds a loud snort of laughter, pressing the back of his hand to his mouth. Stan sneaks a look at him and smirks, his lips twitching as he tries not to laugh. No, this won't be the same when they're a million miles apart. Something happens low in Kyle's stomach when Stan smiles at him like it's a secret he trusts Kyle to keep. It's some combination of arousal and childish excitement. No amount of texting can replicate it.

Maybe the thing he wants to eat is this girl. He called her his FANTASY GIRL, dude.

grosssssssssss

Kyle laughs again, silently. He glances up front at Kenny, afraid that he'll have detected this somehow, Kyle again allowing himself to get happy about something involving Stan. He can't see Kenny's face, just the top of his head. Kyle used to envy Kenny's hair so much, silky straight and blond. He sends a new text to Stan, abandoning the subject of Cartman.

Kenny hates me.

Stan shakes his head while he composes his response, and Kyle wants to peek, but he waits until Stan has sent it.

your opinion means more to him than anything dude. just say your sorry and everything will be good again

Kyle chews his lip, staring at Stan's message. Sometimes he makes fun of Stan for having dumb jock moments, but his misspelling of *you're* is suddenly very endearing. It's just a typo, or maybe even shorthand; Stan is a pretty good writer, a solid B student in Lit classes. He only really had a hard time with theoretical math and Spanish. Kyle tutored him in both. He waits to know what to send next, his elbow pressed against Stan's.

Jesus, you know what I just realized?

what

I'm the only virgin in this car.

He watches Stan read this out of the corner of his eye, waiting for a visible reaction. Stan responds immediately.

you forgot cartman

He claims he's used high school girls like tissues. I wouldn't be surprised if he'd convinced at least one moron football fan to sleep with him.

Now there's a pause, Stan staring at his phone's screen, his thumbs poised over the buttons. They've never talked about the fact that Stan has sex with Wendy, but Kyle is sure that he does. Last year, looking for a pencil, he found a receipt for Magnums in the bottom of Stan's backpack. Apparently every teenage boy buys those, but Kyle thinks Stan might actually need them. He's had a noticeable bulge since sophomore year. Stan's fingers begin moving over the buttons on his phone, and Kyle looks out the window, afraid to see what he's typing. His phone buzzes.

you should be glad you're a virgin

Kyle flushes, acutely aware of every place where his body is touching Stan's. He remembers being fourteen and sick with a fever of 103, an afternoon when Stan came to bring him his homework and sit by his bed for awhile. Stan held his hands just over Kyle's chest and said he could feel the heat rising off him. Kyle managed to get hard under the blankets, despite the fever.

Why should I be glad?

He can feel Stan sigh, though it's inaudible over the jangle of Butters' music. Stan opens his mouth like he wants to answer out loud. He's still staring down at his phone. He types.

this is faggy but it will be special

Kyle feels his body temperature approaching 103, reading this. He makes a small sound in the back of his throat that he hopes Stan won't hear. They blast by a sign out on the highway: Nevada border, 40 miles.

Maybe, Kyle sends.

They're both staring at their phones. Kyle swallows the excess moisture in his mouth and watches from the corner of his eye as Stan does the same.

You should have told me when you first had sex, Kyle sends. *Not the details or anything, just. That it had happened.*

why

Kyle sniffs, and doesn't dignify that with an answer. They tell each other everything. Except the most important things. Stan's thumbs are moving again, keys clicking.

I didn't want to brag

As soon as he's sent that he starts typing again.

and it wasn't that great. I was kind of embarrassed

Did you barf on her or something? Kyle actually doesn't want to know anything about this, but he can't turn back now.

or something

Kyle waits for more and gets nothing. Stan puts his phone down and Kyle closes his into his fist, staring out the window again. He should feel elated, maybe, to hear that Stan's first time with Wendy wasn't perfect. He'd envisioned candlelight, a bed scattered with rose petals, simultaneous orgasms. It pisses him off to hear that Stan wasted his virginity on something unexceptional. He's angry as he composes his next message.

I guess you'll have better sex in college.

Stan stares at this for awhile before responding, thumbs moving listlessly.

I guess

Traffic increases as they get closer to Vegas, and the sun starts dropping toward the desert, still bright. Kyle has a hard time envisioning what he'll do once they arrive. The others must have vetoed Stan's camping plan while Kyle was fuming in the lobby of the last hotel, because they're driving straight into the city.

"Oh, boy, I wish I had my phone!" Butters says, bouncing in his seat.

"For what?" Stan asks.

"So I could take pictures! Look at it, geez!"

"Here, Butters," Stan says, handing him his camera. "Take some for me."

Kyle is vaguely excited by the neon lights himself, as if they're promising him something he won't forget. He feels them sliding across his face like gaudy makeup, their colors sinking into his cheeks. Stan is at his shoulder, looking out the window at the same thing. They turn

to each other and smile. Kyle's eyes burn when he looks out the window again, but it only lasts for half a second. So Stan thinks Kyle's first time will be special. Kyle has imagined it so many different ways, but always with the same person. His fantasies never involve candlelight, rose petals, not even simultaneous orgasms. Stan would be awkward, laughing in nervous hiccups, and so gentle. His thumbs would slide from Kyle's cheekbones to his ears, softly and as many times as necessary, until Kyle was ready.

"Which hotel should I stop at?" Kenny asks. "One of the cheap ones, I guess."

"Nah, let's get a good one," Stan says. "How many times are we all gonna be in Vegas together?"

"Probably never again, but that doesn't mean I want to blow my cash on a room I'm barely going to see," Kenny says.

"I'll treat," Stan says.

"What?" Kyle turns to him, frowning. "Dude, no. We can stay in a dump, it's no big deal."

"You hate dumps," Stan says. "It's okay, really. I had more money saved up than I realized."

Kyle scoffs, his mouth falling open, but Stan just shrugs. Something is weird. If Stan really has extra money, why is Cartman on the trip?

"How 'bout that one with the fountains?" Stan says, pointing. Butters takes a picture.

"The Bellagio?" Kenny says. "I think it's, like. Super expensive."

"No, it's not," Stan says. "Look, pull in there. If it's five hundred bucks a night we'll go somewhere else, but I really don't think it's that bad."

"Dude, what are you doing?" Kyle asks, keeping his voice low. Stan shoulders him.

"Having fun," he says. He starts to say more, than lifts his phone and types it out instead. Kyle sighs and reads the message Stan sent.

I know you haven't had that great of a time so far. that sucks dude. kenny and butters will be gambling, and cartman will probably go look for whores or something. let's have a good time tonight ok?

Kyle bites down at his smile as he types his response: *We don't have to stay in a palace to have a good time.*

couldn't hurt tho, Stan sends back. *and I bet the pool is awesome*

Stan makes the arrangements for the room while the rest of them hang back, Kenny consulting a map of all the casinos in the area while Butters looks on. Cartman is preoccupied with his phone, and Kyle is too worried about how much this room is going to cost to pay much attention to any of them. He watches Stan as he hands his debit card over and laughs at something the front desk clerk has said. He looks so grown up. Kyle wants to take a picture.

"Only three hundred bucks a night for a partial lake view room," Stan says when he walks over to them. Kyle sputters and grabs the bill from Stan's hand.

"Three hundred bucks? Are you kidding me? My parents have paid less for a suite in Manhattan! During the holidays!"

"Well, not everyone has your magical Jew powers of bargaining," Cartman says, snapping his phone shut. "Give me my key, I'm gonna go look around."

"Try not to get herpes," Stan says, handing one of the plastic key cards to him. Cartman smiles in a worrying way, his eyes narrowing.

"You think I need to pay for sex?" he says. "Really? That's ironic, coming from you."

"Coming from me?" Stan says. "Why?"

"No reason," Cartman says, still smirking as he backs away. "I'll see you guys later."

"What the hell was that about?" Kyle asks when Cartman is gone.

"I've got no idea," Stan says. He shakes his head. "Fuck him, anyway. Let's go check out our room."

"I sure do appreciate you paying, Stan," Butters says as they head toward the elevators. "I'll pay you back for all of this someday, honest."

"Don't worry about it, Butters."

"If I win anything tonight, you can have some of it," Kenny says, his face still buried in the casino guide.

"Uh, okay," Stan says. He glances at Kyle, who rolls his eyes.

Their room is on the fifteenth floor, and the view of the "lake" out front is indeed very partial, but they've got a nice view of the strip and the beds are huge, fluffy with down feathers. Kyle is allergic, but only mildly, and he doesn't mention it, not wanting to appear ungrateful. He knows Stan got this room for him, to thank him for putting up with the camping trips, Cartman, and the invasion of his sleeping bag last night.

"I asked about a cot for Cartman, and they said they have extra large ones," Stan says, grinning. He throws his bag onto the bed closest to the window, then takes Kyle's and tosses it there, too. Kenny puts his bag down on the other bed and gets a pen from the room's desk. He sits down and starts circling casinos he wants to visit. Outside, the sun has begun to set, the orange that's bleeding into the sky making the neon seem unimpressive. Kyle stands at the window, and in the reflection he can see Stan gesturing to Butters, talking with his hands.

"Oh, um, I'm gonna take a shower," Butters says. "I feel kinda dirty after that car ride."

"Alright," Kenny says. "I'll be ready in like twenty minutes. I'm making our game plan."

"Sounds good!" Butters kisses the back of Kenny's neck and skips toward the bathroom, shutting the door softly behind him. There's some humming, then the shower comes on. Kyle keeps his back to the room, pretending not to know what Stan is up to.

"I'm gonna call my mom," Stan says. "I got a text from her, she's worried. I'll, uh. I'll be right outside."

He hesitates for a moment, then leaves. The door closes heavily. In the bathroom, Butters is singing the last song that came on in the car. Kyle sucks in his breath and holds it. He can hear Kenny's pen moving on the glossy casino map.

"That was subtle, huh?" he says, turning from the window. He's clutching at his left elbow, feeling idiotic. Kenny doesn't look up.

"You know Stan," Kenny says, muttering. "He doesn't like conflict."

"Ha. Yeah. But you know, I was just being a hysterical bitch. Earlier. I didn't mean any of that. You know that."

Kenny says nothing, just keeps writing. He doesn't look angry, but his stoicism seems forced.

"So you hate me," Kyle says, his voice shaking. Kenny closes his eyes, his pen going still.

"Here," he says, getting up. Kyle thinks he might get punched, but even that would be better than Kenny's indifference. He watches Kenny root through his bag, and huffs a nervous laugh when Kenny pulls out a bottle of vodka.

"This is the good stuff," Kenny says, bringing it to Kyle. "Grey Goose. I was saving for - I don't know. But I need to keep my head tonight if I'm going to win any money, and you need this more than I ever did." He pushes the bottle into Kyle's hand. The glass is clouded, smooth; it feels expensive.

"Kenny," Kyle says, staring down a the vodka.

"Drink that tonight with Stan," Kenny says. "I've seen you wasted when he wasn't, and I guess he only gets drunk with his football buddies, but you've never really gotten trashed together as far as I know, and you're in Vegas, and, just. Drink that. All of it, between the two of you."

"That's your prescription?" Kyle says, hurt. Kenny is still avoiding his eyes. "That'll fix everything?"

"Doubtful," Kenny says. He pulls off his shirt. "But it's worth a fucking shot, right?" He throws his shirt onto the bed and unbuttons his jeans.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Kyle asks.

"I'm gonna have sex with my boyfriend, if you don't mind." Kenny steps out of his jeans and walks to the bathroom in his boxers. "I'll try to keep it quiet this time, but I'm not making any promises."

"Kenny -"

"Kyle." Kenny stops with his hand on the door and turns back to him. He looks like he's going to rant, but his eyes soften and he shakes his head. "You know what you need to do. Maybe that will help. I don't know what else to tell you."

He disappears into the bathroom, and Kyle is left holding the bottle of vodka, staring at the closed door. Butters makes a sound of happy surprise as the rings on the shower curtain click across the bar, and the last thing Kyle needs right now is to overhear another round of passionate fucking. He walks out into the hallway, dazed, still carrying the Grey Goose.

Stan is sitting on the floor near the room, his cell phone pressed to his ear. He pats a spot of carpet beside him without looking up, and Kyle sits.

"Yeah," Stan says, speaking into his phone. "I know, Mom. Jesus, yes. I've tried! No, I have no idea. I gotta - Mom, I gotta go. Okay. Alright, I will. I will! Okay, bye. Ah - I love you, too. Bye."

He hangs up and looks over at Kyle, raising his eyebrows when he sees the bottle of vodka that's resting against Kyle's bent knees.

"What's that?" Stan asks.

"Grey Goose."

"Okay. Kenny gave it to you?"

"Yeah." Kyle peels off the seal around the cap and pops it open. He drinks from the bottle, wincing.

"Um," Stan says. "I take it this means things didn't go well in there?"

"Not really. You want some?"

Stan nods and takes the bottle, drinks. He keeps his eyes on Kyle like he's waiting for an explanation.

"Kenny's in there fucking Butters," Kyle says.

"Good for them."

"Yeah. Can we go someplace else? Maybe get some dinner?"

"Are we bringing this with us?" Stan asks, lifting the bottle.

"Fuck yes."

Stan snorts. "Alright. I'd better get my bag, then. I'll get our swimsuits, too."

"Kay."

Stan scrambles up, then bends back down again. He touches Kyle's knee, jiggling it a little.

"Are we still gonna have fun?" he asks. Kyle drinks from the bottle and tries put on a convincing smile.

"Yeah," he says. "Kenny's pissed, but he'll get over it. I'm okay."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

Stan pats Kyle's knee and goes back into the room. Kyle drinks from the vodka again, thinking about what Kenny said. *You know what you have to do.* He doesn't, actually. Kyle knows what he wants, what he needs, but he doesn't know what to do about the fact that he'll never get it. Drinking vodka does seem like an increasingly effective plan, even as it burns all the way down his throat, sitting heavy in his stomach. He's taking another swig when Stan dashes out of the room with his shoulder bag.

"Dude," he says, shaking his head. "Butters is loud."

"Are you surprised?"

"Not really." Stan helps Kyle up and takes another drink from the bottle before stowing it in the bag. He claps Kyle's shoulder. "Are you ready to fucking do this?" he asks.

"Yes," Kyle says, though he's pretty sure he's not. But it feels good to be alone with Stan, and his head is already swimming a little, making him bold enough to lean close to Stan when they're in the elevator. They ride down to the lobby and get a table on the patio of the hotel's steakhouse, where they can watch the fountain show from their seats. Kyle dumps their water glasses over the balcony when the waiter has gone, and Stan laughs as he watches Kyle replace the water with vodka.

"Kenny says we have to drink all of this," Kyle says.

"Okay, dude, but pace yourself," Stan says. "It's like seven o'clock, and I want to stay up all night."

"All night?" Kyle grins at him across the table.

"Yep. Till the sun comes up."

Kyle slows down after that, already drunk enough to laugh at everything Stan says, his cheeks aching. They eat cheeseburgers and talk about the old days: Chinpokemon, Lord of the Rings, Guitar Hero. Every story seems funnier than it has before, and when Kyle's knee touches Stan's under the table Stan doesn't move his away.

"You remember when, um," Kyle says, still laughing from the last story Stan told, though he's already forgotten what it was. "You remember when we TP'd Mrs. Dreibel's house?"

"Oh, shit, yeah, the art teacher!" Stan cracks up, clapping. "You were like, ready to hang yourself with guilt, dude."

"I was such a neurotic fucking kid," Kyle says. "How'd you guys put up with me?"

"Um, first of all, 'was?'" Stan says, and Kyle kicks him. "And secondly, like, whatever. You were the best person in South Park, easy. I knew that from day one." Stan holds up a finger to emphasize: *day one*. Kyle snorts.

"Best person in South Park is like saying, uh. Best Chinese food in Mexico."

They both laugh hard at this, Stan shaking his head.

"To my best friend," he says, lifting his glass of vodka. "Kyle Broflovski: the best Chinese food in Mexico. Probably the best Chinese food in the world."

"There's better Chinese food in L.A., I bet," Kyle says. He clinks his glass against Stan's and drinks.

"Nope," Stan says. "You're the best Chinese food anywhere. Your Chinese food is better than the Chinese food in *China*."

"You're drunk." Kyle is laughing too hard too talk, almost.

"So? Man, fuck this waiter." Stan digs out his wallet and throws three twenties on the table, more than enough to cover their burgers and Cokes. "Let's go swimming."

"Okay, fucking, uh, high roller. Why are you throwing all this money around?"

"I sort of feel like it's my last night on earth?" Stan says, standing. Kyle downs the rest of his vodka and follows Stan from the table, feeling pleasantly wobbly.

"Don't say that." He catches Stan's arm. "It's not your last night."

"We'll hit California tomorrow," Stan says.

"Yeah, and we'll have one night of camping there, and then that hotel you wanted to get on the coast. And that's not, like. The end of the world."

"Whatever," Stan says. "I don't want to think about it. C'mon, we can change in here." He pulls Kyle toward a lobby bathroom.

"I need to digest first," Kyle says, whining and pulling him back. "C'mon, let's go to the casino."

"You actually want to gamble?" Stan seems charmed. He loops his arm around Kyle's neck and walks him toward the casino area.

"Not really," Kyle says. "But don't tell Cartman."

"I'll tell him you gambled your ass off," Stan says. "That you lost a hundred bucks like a gentile."

Kyle cracks up, flopping against Stan. "I love it when you say gentile." He hooks his arm around Stan's waist to steady himself.

"Tell me more words to say."

"Jewish ones?"

"Any ones."

Kyle thinks. They're pressed together, standing at the entrance to the casino. A woman in a vest and bow tie is smiling at them, and Kyle feels like hugging her, like hugging everyone in here, but he also doesn't want to let go of Stan. He's pretty sure the vested lady is supposed to check their bag, but she just waves them in like she's got a weakness for boys who drape themselves all over each other in public.

"I can't think of anything for you to say," Kyle says, disappointed in himself. All the things he wants to hear from Stan are unmentionable, filthy and sweet.

"You'll come up with something," Stan says. He pats Kyle's chest. "C'mon, let's check this shit out."

They wander aimlessly, amused by everything, sneaking drinks from the Grey Goose bottle. Inside the cave of the casino, the whole world feels bright and loud in a friendly way, and if Stan lets go of Kyle for a moment he'll grab for his hand when he's ready to move on to the next flashy display of cards or slot machines, pulling him along. Kyle has lost track of how long they've walked the aisles when Stan stops abruptly near a craps table. Kyle crashes into his back, bracing his hands on Stan's hips and leaving them there.

"You know what I just realized?" Stan says, looking over his shoulder at Kyle.

"What?"

"This place is kind loser-y."

"Yeah. Don't tell Kenny that, though."

"Let's say a prayer real quick that Kenny wins a million dollars tonight."

"Kay, yeah."

They both go quiet, and Kyle shuts his eyes, pressing his face to Stan's shoulder. The noise of the casino seems to soften around them. He feels like he's sitting high inside his own head, like anyone who passes by won't be able to see him. He prays, but not for Kenny.

God, please don't take him away from me.

It's the smell of Stan's shirt that corrupts what should have been a selfless prayer. He says another quick one for Kenny's happiness before opening his eyes.

"Well," Stan says. He sighs and puts his hands over Kyle's. "Time for the pool."

They drink more on the way to the lobby bathrooms, spilling some, shushing each other, laughing until the vodka dribbles from the corners of their lips. The men's room is empty. They dart into the handicapped stall and change in front of each other for the first time in maybe seven years. Kyle is too drunk to see straight under the bathroom's fancy mood lighting, but he gets one good eyeful of Stan's cock. It's big and heavy-looking even while soft, hanging below the hem of his t-shirt.

"I forgot you weren't circumcised," Kyle says, just in case Stan saw him ogling, trying to play it off as casual. Stan laughs so hard he falls over.

The pool area is set up to look like a Mediterranean courtyard. After a fifth of vodka, with the pool lights glowing against the dark, the effect is stunningly convincing. The pool is empty, everyone at dinner or the casino, so there's no one to be splashed when Stan takes a running leap into the water. Kyle laughs and jumps in after him. The water is warm, and it has a kind of magical quality, glowing green under the starless, light-poisoned sky.

"You should have dry cleaned my bathing suit," Stan says, swimming to Kyle. "Butters' balls were in here."

"Sick, dude!" Kyle laughs. He wants to put his arms around Stan. Before that can happen, he stretches out to float on his back, something that normally makes him feel anxious, mostly due to the vulnerability of his nipples. With Stan beside him, he's not afraid to close his eyes and float, safely monitored. Stan puts his hands under Kyle's back and carries him around like a waiter's tray, guiding him through the water. Kyle laughs, the sound of it muffled by the water in his ears. He opens his eyes and looks up at Stan.

"Put your arms out, too," Stan says. Kyle puts his arms out, one slipping behind Stan's back.

"Remember when we did this when we were kids?" Kyle asks, though he knows Stan remembers. That's why he's doing it now.

"Yeah," Stan says, still moving Kyle through the water like he's a magic carpet and Stan is the magic. "This was your favorite, right?"

"Nope."

"No?"

"My favorite was this." Kyle slides off of Stan's hands and swims around him, holding him still when he tries to turn. He drapes his arms over Stan's shoulders and hoists himself up onto his back. Stan gets the idea and pulls Kyle's legs around his waist.

"Oh, yeah," Stan says. "I'd try to swim with you on my back."

"The rescue game," Kyle says. He would pretend to be a helpless boater who couldn't swim, stranded at sea. Stan was the Navy SEAL. Sometimes they switched places, but Kyle liked riding on Stan's back better than trying to carry him. They usually only played this when no one was around to tease them for it. Kyle knew what he was because of this game. He would wrap his arms and legs around a pillow at night, pretending it was Stan.

Stan tries to swim a little, but mostly just walks around where the water is just up to his shoulders, Kyle holding on tight. They can hear the fountains, and some distant noise from the strip, like television commercials from another room. There's faux-Mediterranean music playing on the pool deck, mandolins warbling. Overhead, spotlights cut through the hazy sky.

"Remember when you carried me home?" Kyle says, starting to feel drowsy. His nipples are as sharp as icicles against Stan's back. "From Clyde's party?"

"Dude, that was like five days ago."

"I know." Kyle sighs and rests his head on Stan's shoulder. "Want me to carry you for awhile?"

"Nah. I'm good."

Stan starts humming something under his breath. It's the song he wrote for Kyle when they were kids, the one about hybrid cars. Kyle closes his eyes and listens for awhile, then hums along with him.

"I thought of what we could do," Kyle says.

"Yeah?"

"We could run away and join the circus. Kenny and Butters, too. Hell, even Cartman. He could be the amazing fat man. Kenny and Butters would be, like, trapeze artists."

"Okay. What would we be? Me and you?"

"I don't know. I think we'd ride elephants."

"Cool. Let's do it."

Kyle starts to feel cold, and he clings more tightly to Stan, trying to absorb his body heat. Stan just keeps walking through the water like he'll never get tired of it, but he goes stiff when they hear people approaching the pool area, the shrieking laughter of what sounds like an entire bachelorette party.

"We should get out," Kyle says, so that Stan won't have to.

They wrap themselves in towels and slip past the women who are pouring into the pool area, one of them jumping in with her clothes on while the others laugh hysterically. Stan grabs the shoulder bag and then Kyle's hand, pulling him back toward the hotel.

"I bet the other guys are still out," Stan says. "You want to order ice cream from room service?"

"Room service is so expensive," Kyle says, though he is hungry, and ice cream sounds perfect. “And they probably won't have my shitty sugar free kind.”

"Sure they will," Stan says. “And I don't care how much it costs. It'll be worth it.” He squeezes Kyle's hand, and that's all the convincing he needs.

They drink more vodka while they're waiting for their sundaes to arrive, sitting on the bed in fresh boxer shorts, reeking of chlorine. Kyle stares at Stan's naked chest without shame. Stan's hands are on Kyle's knees, and they feel like they always have: possessive, protective, perfect. Kyle reaches up to fix Stan's hair for him. His bangs are damp and messy, and Kyle orders them carefully, taking his time.

“Where do you think Kenny is right now?” Kyle asks.

“See, I knew it,” Stan says. “You're still worried about him.”

“I'm allowed to care about other people.”

“Other people?”

“Other than you,” Kyle says. He feels mean for saying so and gives Stan an apologetic look. Stan is so drunk, color high in his cheeks, his eyes glazed.

“I know that,” he says. “I don't – I'm glad you care about Kenny. I mean, I do, too. Remember, we took care of him.”

It's not really a question, but Kyle nods. Guiltily, part of him loved that week. He got to spend most of it in bed with Stan, Kenny safe between them.

“I felt like we could do anything,” Kyle says. “The two of us. Like we could fix any problem.”

“We didn't really fix him, though.”

“I know.”

“Butters did?” Stan looks uncertain about this. Kyle laughs.

“Wherever Kenny is, Butters is with him,” he says. “So that's good.”

Stan nods in agreement. He looks down at Kyle's legs. They're folded Indian-style, same as Stan's, their knees touching.

“I was scared,” Stan says. He takes Kyle's hands and presses them between his. Stan's are bigger, smoothly callused from so many years of football, push-ups, part time jobs. “What happened to Kenny, that day? It scared the shit out of me, seeing him like that. I was really glad you were there.”

“Me?” Kyle can hear something rattling out in the hallway, probably a room service cart with their ice cream.

“Yeah.” Stan turns Kyle's hands over like he's going to read his fortune from them. “Don't you know how scared I get, all the time? When you came to my games – I needed you there. I can't do this without you, at UCLA. I don't think I can do it.”

“You can, don't be –”

There's a knock on the door, and Kyle wants to scream that they've got the wrong room, but Stan is already catapulting off of the bed, going for the door. He's still in his boxer shorts, shameless. Kyle rolls off the bed and rifles through his bag until he finds his last clean t-shirt. He puts it on and considers sleep pants, but decides against them. Stan tips the guy at the door and pushes the cart into the room himself, smiling like he's already forgotten what he was saying before the ice cream arrived.

“Dude,” Kyle says, watching Stan remove a ridiculously fancy silver cover from a giant bowl of ice cream. “You're gonna be great in college. You're gonna be a star. Everyone will love you.”

“I don't know,” Stan says, mumbling. “Look, there's cherries and everything. Here, c'mon, before it melts.”

Kyle lets the subject die, hoping he'll remember this in the morning. The fact that Stan is scared shouldn't make him feel less terrified himself, but it does. They eat their sundaes in bed, staring at the TV, shoulders pressed together. The ice cream is good, grittier than the real thing but still better than the usual safe-for-diabetics crap, but Kyle can't really appreciate the taste. All he can think about is Stan's lips, how they must be sweet and cold. He wants to taste them, warm them up. He wants Stan's mouth all over him, trails of sticky sugar left behind on his skin.

They start getting tired after eating, and Kyle clears the ice cream bowls off the bed so they won't wake up in puddles of melted goo. He washes his hands and stares at himself in the bathroom mirror. His hair has dried stupidly, but otherwise he looks better than he expected. He's gotten the start of a tan over the past four days, and this fast food diet has added a few pounds to his skinny frame. He wets one of the washcloths on the counter and brings it to Stan, who is already stretched out in bed, hugging a pillow.

“Here,” Kyle says. “For your hands.”

Stan rolls onto his back and lets Kyle wipe his hands clean. They're not as sticky as Kyle expected, but he takes his time anyway, wanting to kiss the pad of every finger. Stan watches him work, his eyes half-closed. When he's done, Kyle tosses the washcloth onto the nightstand and sticks his legs under the blankets, scooting closer to Stan. He lets Stan watch him tiredly for awhile, waiting to see what will happen. Even now, drunk, he's not expecting much. Stan takes hold of Kyle's face clumsily, turning his jaw like he's trying to get a better look at him.

“Your face is perfect,” he says. He sounds unhappy about this. Kyle laughs.

“Yeah, okay.”

“It is, shit. Trust me.”

“Trust you? Okay, you drunk asshole. That hurts, by the way.”

“Oh, sorry.” Stan releases Kyle's jaw from his death grip and pets the mark he left there with two fingers, softly. “Sorry, Kyle.”

“Fuck you. 'Sorry?' Okay, Stan. You're sorry, great.” Kyle's rage feels different now, diluted but still dangerous, cloudy poison. He rolls away from Stan, beginning to feel sick from too much ice cream, or vodka, or both. Stan scoots up behind him, like Kyle knew he would. He squirms under the blankets and presses himself to Kyle's back, touches his hip.

“Kyle,” he says, right in his ear. “Don't hate me. You're my Chinese food. My best Chinese food, forever.”

“Yeah? So why don't you eat me?”

Stan laughs, and Kyle does, too, though it's not funny. He laughs harder when Stan puts his teeth around his shoulder, pretending to take a bite. He presses his teeth into Kyle's neck, and they're both laughing, but it drains away when Kyle feels Stan's tongue on his skin, soft over the shallow teeth marks he left. Stan lets out a choppy breath, tickling the short hairs at the back of Kyle's neck. He licks Kyle again, from the collar of his t-shirt to his hair line. He does it again, and again, and Kyle's cock is already pressing against the front of his boxers.

“Sorry,” Stan whispers, breathing hard. His grip on Kyle's hip has gotten tight enough to leave a bruise. Kyle closes his eyes, selfish prayers growing inside him like flowering weeds.

“Don't stop,” he says, whispering. This is it, last chance, doesn't matter that they're drunk. “Please? It feels good.”

Stan hesitates. Kyle wants to do something to encourage him, but he can't make himself move. He lets out his breath when Stan lowers his mouth to his neck again, waits to be licked.

“We can't.” Stan sounds like he'll cry. Kyle shakes his head against the pillow, his eyes still jammed shut. He's afraid to look.

“It doesn't matter,” Kyle says. “I don't need anything. I won't tell anyone.”

“Kyle –”

There's a sound at the door, a beep: someone's key card. Stan rolls away from Kyle as the door is flung open. Kyle stays where he is, his eyes still closed.

“Oh, sorry, were you guys about to fuck?” Cartman says. He snickers and throws something onto the desk. “Guess what, assholes? Guess who just won two thousand bucks?”

“You did not.” Stan sounds fine. Not wrecked, not wanting. Tears burn behind Kyle's eyelids, and he keeps his lashes closed over them.

“Did too,” Cartman says. “Check this out.”

“Holy shit!”

“Hey, Kyle, wake up! Look at my money.”

“Leave him alone.” Now Stan is all predatory; this is what he likes. Protecting Kyle, keeping him in mint condition, unused on Stan's shelf.

“Whatever, dickwads. I'm gonna go get my own room. A super awesome suite, and you guys can't come.”

“You're going to blow that money on half a night in some cheesy hotel room? Cartman, you asshole. You should give that money to Kenny.”

“Fuck no! Are you crazy? I earned this with my amazing card playing skills. That broke piece of shit and his little lap dog can find their own way.”

“You're going to hell,” Stan says. Cartman laughs.

“Yeah, okay. See you there, homo. Have fun taking pictures of Kyle while he sleeps. I'll be up in my suite, watching title fights on a 60-inch flat screen. See you in the morning, fags.”

“Maybe you can find your own fucking way home!” Stan shouts, but Cartman just slips out the door, disappearing again. Kyle wipes away the only tear that escaped before Stan can see it. His chest is jittery with the effort of holding the others in, but he can do it, he has to.

“Can you fucking believe him?” Stan says, huffing. Kyle doesn't respond. When Stan reaches for his shoulder, Kyle slaps his hand away.

“Don't touch me,” he says. His voice is stronger than he expected. He's proud of himself.

“Kyle. I'm sorry, that was –”

“I know you're sorry. I've heard it. That's good, you should be. Now leave me the fuck alone. I'm tired.”

Stan says nothing. Kyle can feel him sitting up in bed, watching him. After a few long minutes, Stan turns out the light beside the bed and settles in for sleep on the other side, far from Kyle.

Kyle sleeps easily and without dreams, pulled under by the alcohol, blacked out. He wakes up to flat darkness, heavy silence. He feels like he swallowed a bowling ball, an evil thing in his stomach that won't be easy to purge. His head hurts, and he's coated in sweat, shaking. He closes his eyes again, tries to sleep it off, but the shaking only intensifies. He wants to get up and go to the bathroom, to try to drink some water, but he can't move. Minutes pass, and his heart pounds as his teeth begin to chatter.

“Stan?” he says, weakly. Stan sits up quick, like he was waiting to hear his name.

“Yeah? What's wrong? Are you okay?”

“N-no. I think. Something's wrong.”

Stan puts the light on, and Kyle pinches his eyes shut against it, his head pounding. He has vague memories of the evening: Stan licked him, they fought. It all seems far away now, this pain the only thing that's real. Stan is touching him, feeling his forehead.

“You're burning up, dude.”

“I'm not. I'm cold.”

“You're cold? God, Kyle, you're shaking really hard. Shit – fuck. You've never drank that much before?”

“You know I haven't. Oh, God, Stan, it really hurts.”

“What hurts?” Stan rolls him onto his back, and Kyle groans.

“My stomach. My head. I don't know.”

“Do you have your insulin thing?”

“The meter? Yeah, it's in my bag. But this – you think the alcohol fucked up my blood sugar?”

“I don't know. Maybe?” Stan is already kneeling on the floor, digging through Kyle's bag. “Where – are you sure you brought the meter?”

“Yeah, it's in there. I had a treatment before I left, enough for two weeks. Shit.” He moans and rolls onto his side again, curling into a ball. There's something very wrong, and it's right at the center of him. He thinks of kidney failure, liver poisoning.

“Fuck, what if they brought real ice cream?” Stan says. His voice is fucked, shaking hard. “With sugar? Oh, fuck, shit, I should have thought about that, I should have known that might happen.” He's tearing Kyle's bag apart, flinging stuff everywhere. When he finds the container for Kyle's insulin meter he fumbles it, cursing.

“Stan,” Kyle says, hugging his arms around himself. “I think I'm really sick.”

“Fuck.” Stan walks to the bed, puts the case on the nightstand and pulls the tester pen out. “Okay, give me your finger.”

Stan goes pale as he takes Kyle's hand and pricks it for a blood sample. Kyle watches him work, weak with sickness and still drunk, shivering. Stan puts the strip into the meter and waits for the reading.

“You're okay,” he says, though the meter hasn't finished processing yet. He pushes Kyle's hair off his sweaty forehead, still staring at the meter, his hand shaking badly. Kyle startles when it beeps, and Stan shows him the screen: 53.

“That's not good,” Kyle says, though Stan knows this, his breath coming harder as he stares at the reading. “Shit, Stan, I'm not – I'm gonna have a stroke, I can feel it. My vision's all blurry.”

“Kyle, please, don't – okay.” Stan throws the meter onto the nightstand. “Hang on. I'm gonna put a shirt on. Hang on.”

Stan ends up in one of Kenny's shirts, and he lifts Kyle out of the bed, still barefoot as he carries him to the door. He's making aborted little crying sounds, swallowing them down, cursing as he struggles to get the door open while carrying Kyle.

“You're gonna be okay,” Stan says. He sniffles and kicks the door open after he's managed to work the knob, carries Kyle out into the hall. “I'm gonna – gonna take you downstairs. They'll call an ambulance.” He hoists Kyle up, getting a better grip on him. Kyle keeps trying to talk, but he can't make his voice work, and he's shaking so badly that his muscles feel out of his control. The fact that Stan's shirt smells like cigarettes is confusing, upsetting.

Kyle is in and out of consciousness on the way down to the lobby, his head lolling over the side of Stan's arm. Colors blur together, people gasp, everything is too loud. Stan is asking for help, trying not to cry. Kyle thinks he hears his mother's voice, but it's just some front desk clerk. The air changes: they're outside, a valet is barking something into a walkie-talkie. Kyle stares up at the flashing lights in the motor lobby, everything an angry splash, like paint mixed with too much water. Someone tries to take him from Stan, and Stan won't let them. He sits down on the curb and hugs Kyle to his chest, rocking him. He's given up on trying not to cry, though he's only doing so in shallow little gasps, quietly, close to Kyle's ear. Sirens wail, getting closer, and Kyle doesn't want them to come. He wants to die in Stan's arms, right here on the curb.

He wakes again when he's being strapped into a gurney. He whimpers, reaching for Stan. He's there, and he manages to touch Kyle's outstretched hand before being batted away by paramedics.

“I want to ride in back with him,” Stan says.

“What's his name?” one of the paramedics asks. She's a chubby woman who's rolling gurney-strapped Kyle into the back of the ambulance with the help of another paramedic.

“His name is Kyle,” Stan says. “I can ride in back, right? Can I?”

“Yeah, c'mon, I need to talk to you. Sit there. Okay. Kyle? My name is Nancy. Can you hear me?”

He can, but he can't make his voice work. He twitches, afraid that it's a seizure.

“He has diabetes,” Stan says. Kyle hasn't heard his voice this wrecked since they were very young. “Type 1.”

“I heard you the first time,” Nancy says. “What's he had to drink tonight?”

“Vodka. A lot of it. Oh, shit, shit.”

Kyle blinks out of consciousness again. He feels himself in motion, wonders if he's passing into some other world. When he opens his eyes, the blur of florescent lights it too bright, so he closes them again. He can hear Stan's voice as he tells a new person who Kyle is: eighteen years old, diabetes type 1, not a drug user, allergic to walnuts. Kyle drifts between what's happening and disquieting darkness, flattered that Stan knows these things about him. Even his age sounds like something he didn't know about himself when Stan says it.

The world shifts and realigns around him. He feels it from far away, in a place where he can't hear Stan crying anymore. He's been comatose twice in his life before this. Stan was there when he woke up, both times. Stan was the one who saved him, both times.

He feels close to understanding something and tries to stay down in the dark where he might know it. Outside of his body, the world grows quieter. He wonders if he's dead, and opens his eyes to find out.

It's daytime, though just barely, and he's in a room with a window. There's an IV in his arm, a blanket over his legs, but he's still wearing the t-shirt he put on when the ice cream arrived. His boxer shorts are hidden under the blanket. He turns his head and sees Kenny sitting beside his bed, chewing on the sleeve of his hooded sweatshirt. Kenny sees him move and smiles sleepily, scooting his chair over to the bed. His eyes are red, and his enviable hair looks greasy.

"Hey," he says, softly. He puts his hand on Kyle's chest. "You're awake."

"Where am I?" Kyle asks. His voice is working again. He's not dead, unless Kenny is, too. He puts his hand on top of Kenny's, relieved to find that it's warm and solid.

"The hospital," Kenny says. He swallows something else down, maybe tears. "Fuck, Kyle, I'm sorry."

"For what? Where's Stan?"

"He went with Butters to get some food. He wanted to stay, but he's the only one with money on his debit card, and nobody had cash." Kenny shakes his head, resting both elbows on Kyle's hospital bed. "I lost mine. My money."

"Kenny."

"You knew I would."

"I don't know anything. What happened? Was I in a coma?"

Kenny laughs a little, shaking his head. "No. You were drunk as a boiled owl. Stan was, too, raving like you were going to die. You were hypoglycemic when they brought you in. They gave you something to get your blood sugar back to normal, but it wasn't that serious."

"What's this IV?"

"Just fluids. You were dehydrated, too. Fuck, Kyle, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have given you that booze."

"It's not your fault," Kyle says. They stare at each other for awhile, their hands still pressed together. "It didn't work," Kyle says. He feels so weak, like he weighs two pounds. Kenny nods.

"I guess I knew it wouldn't," he says.

For awhile they're both quiet, and Kyle thinks of scooting over and offering Kenny half of the narrow bed. He looks so tired.

"What are you going to do?" Kyle asks. Kenny shakes his head.

"I don't know," he says. "How about you?"

Kyle laughs, and it turns into a weak cough. He thinks of telling Kenny what happened with Stan, the licking, but maybe he imagined that. It doesn't matter if it was real or not, here in the light of day. Stan will pretend not to remember.

"You want to know what I think?" Kenny asks.

"Yes."

"I think it's good that you're going to school on the east coast. Getting away from him. This isn't good for you. None of it's been any good for you."

Kyle looks away from him, at the window. If he wasn't too dehydrated to manage it, his eyes might be wet. His fingers twitch on top of Kenny's hand while he waits to get angry about what he just said.

"I know," Kyle says. "But I can't do anything without him." He thinks of something Stan said last night, trying to remember. Something about football.

"Yes, you can," Kenny says. "You've just never tried."

Kyle laughs to himself, the pale light through the window blurring with something that isn't quite tears.

"I thought I was dying," he says. "Last night."

"Yeah, well." There are footsteps out in the hallway. Kyle can hear Butters' voice. Kenny stands. "You weren't," he says.

Stan comes through the door first, and flies to Kyle when he sees that he's awake. Kyle sits up, opening his arms for Stan. He lets himself be hugged, held, lets Stan sniffle against his shoulder.

"You look awful," Kyle says, petting Stan's hair.

"I'm such an idiot," Stan says. His voice is muffled against Kyle's shirt. He doesn't seem to willing to let go of him. Kyle looks over at Butters, who grins and waves.

"We brought you some breakfast," Butters says. "Blueberry muffins!"

"Thanks, Butters." Kyle tries to extract himself from Stan, but he's still not letting go. He meets Kenny's eyes, and Kenny shakes his head.

"You two are something else," he says. "One measly bottle of hard liquor and you end up in the goddamn emergency room."

"Well, he does have diabetes," Stan says. He sits back, his hands sliding down to Kyle's elbows. "Are you sure you're okay?" he asks. "The doctor said you were just hungover and dehydrated, and something else – hypo something?"

"Hypoglycemic," Kyle says. "It's just, like. A hunger-induced panic attack, sort of."

"Hunger? But we ate all that ice cream."

"Yeah, but that artificial sugar crap isn't enough to counter half a bottle of vodka. I didn't really eat enough during dinner, either. I was too busy drunkenly reminiscing." He can't believe how broken Stan looks, even now. His eyes are so red. He's still in Kenny's tobacco-scented shirt, but he's wearing jeans, too. Kenny must have brought him some. "Are they going to arrest me?" Kyle asks.

Stan raises his eyebrows. "For what – oh. Underage drinking? Dude, it's Vegas. No."

"Did you bust a capillary or something?" Kyle asks, touching the corner of Stan's left eye.

"Yes," Stan says. "Crying."

"We were really drunk," Kyle says. He looks over at Butters. "Can I have a muffin now?"

"You sure can! We got orange juice, too."

They eat breakfast in tired silence, Stan sitting on Kyle's bed and Kenny in the room's single chair, Butters in his lap. Butters is the only one of them who doesn't look partially destroyed, though he is quieter than normal.

"Where's Cartman?" Kyle asks.

"Who knows," Stan says. "In the presidential suite, I guess. I haven't called him." Kyle widens his eyes at the mention of Cartman being able to afford a suite, and Stan shakes his head.

"He already told me, Kyle," Kenny says. "You don't need to protect me. Cartman is lucky. I'm not. It's not news to me."

"Something good's gonna happen for you soon," Butters says. He wipes muffin crumbs from his lips and rests his head on Kenny's shoulder. "I just know it."

"Yeah, no kidding." Kenny smiles and kisses Butters on the nose. "What do you think you are?"

"Me?" Butters says. He lifts his head, that baby animal expression on his face. "Well, I'm –"

Kenny kisses him, cupping his face in his hands. Kyle tries not to stare, but it's surprisingly hot. He looks at Stan to check his reaction. Stan just looks exhausted, watching them with half-lidded eyes.

"You're my good luck charm," Kenny says to Butters, who wilts toward him like he wants to be kissed again. He seems to remember where he is and blushes, pressing his fist to his mouth.

"I didn't do a very good job of being good luck last night," he says.

"Last night was my fault," Kenny says. "I jinxed myself."

"I can give you guys some money," Stan says. Kenny groans.

"Shut up, Marsh," he says. "You've already bankrupted yourself on this trip."

"No, I haven't," Stan says.

"Oh, shit," Kyle says. "Did they call my parents? Is this little adventure going to be reported on their insurance?"

"Dude, I didn't give them your insurance information," Stan says, laughing. "I know a lot about you, but I don't know your dad's fucking insurance carrier."

"I'm surprised they admitted him, then," Kenny says. He eases Butters off his lap and stands. "I'm gonna go have a cigarette. You coming?" he asks, pinching Butters' ass. Butters grins and nods.

"Don't tell me you have him smoking now," Stan says.

"No, I just like to watch," Butters says, clutching at Kenny's arm as they walk toward the door. Kenny turns back to Stan and Kyle and raises his eyebrows. Stan snorts.

"Fucking weird to see Kenny like this," Stan says when they're gone. He settles back onto the pillows, beside Kyle.

"Jesus," Kyle says. He rubs his hands over his face. "I'm a dead man."

"Huh? Why?"

"The insurance! They're not going to let me out of here without paying, and I can't pay for a fucking emergency room visit, it's probably like a thousand bucks. My parents are gonna find out I was drinking. Fuck!"

"It was thousand and five hundred," Stan says. He's picking at his nails, avoiding Kyle's incredulous stare. "And don't worry about it. I paid already, cash."

"What?" Kyle shoves him. "Stan, what the fuck? Are you joking?"

"No." He sighs and looks up at Kyle like he's afraid he'll be scolded. "I have to tell you something."

"What? You're selling drugs? Where the fuck are you getting all this money?"

"UCLA gave me a signing bonus. It's not technically legal, so it had to be this big secret."

"What the fuck? This is in addition to the scholarship?"

"Yeah. Up front."

Kyle stares at him, overwhelmed by the amount of questions he wants to ask. He huffs, at a loss.

"Are you going to tell me how much it was for?" Kyle asks. Stan groans.

"I feel like an asshole," he says. "This is why I didn't want to tell you."

"Why?"

"'Cause it's a lot, okay?"

"How much? Fuck, Stan, you tell me everything! Or you're supposed to."

Stan scoffs. "It's thirty thousand dollars, okay?"

"Holy shit!"

"I know!"

"Stan!"

"What?"

"How the fuck – how – why didn't you tell me?"

"I just told you why! It doesn't even feel real to me. And I thought – fuck."

"You thought what?" Kyle is reeling, his eyes dropping down to Stan's throwing arm, the one he held Kyle with in the sleeping bag the other night. Apparently it's worth thirty thousand dollars, up front.

"I thought you'd hate me for going there just because of the money!" Stan says, sitting up. "Other schools offered me scholarships. East coast schools. Not Penn State, but schools that are, like, a train ride away. But as soon as my dad heard about this thirty thousand, he was all, like, in my fucking face about how much I needed to take it, and he's right, I mean, I could break my arm in my first game, but whatever happens I'll have this money, and it's like a down payment on a house, okay, Kyle? Okay?"

Kyle looks away from Stan, his eyes narrowing. *East coast schools, a train ride away.* He thinks of the house Stan could buy with that money, and the cheerleader he would share the master bedroom with.

"Wait," Kyle says. He closes his eyes, shakes his head. "Wait, just. If you have all this money, why the fuck did Cartman have to come on this trip with us? You could have just told me your grandparents gave you graduation money, you could have told me anything –"

"I know, I'm sorry," Stan says. He winces, groans. "It's just – it's Wendy."

"*Wendy*?"

"Wendy told me to bring him. She felt really guilty about what she said at graduation. She thought he'd feel better if he was included in something –"

"What the fuck does Wendy care?" Kyle asks, quickly becoming hysterical.

"I know!" Stan backs away, looking increasingly guilty. "I told her 'fuck no,' but then Butters couldn't come, and I thought –"

"You *thought*? You thought what, Stan? What the fuck could you have been thinking? That it would be *fun*?"

"Well, yeah!" Stan says, frowning. "I mean, when we were kids –"

"When we were kids he tried to kill me on a regular basis!"

"Oh, Jesus, not really."

"Yes, really! What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I'm nostalgic, okay? I –"

"Nostalgic? *Nostalgic*?"

"I want things to be like they used to be!" Stan says, shouting. His face is red, chest heaving. He gets off the bed, cursing, and walks to the window. "When we were kids. I wanted things to be like that again."

"Oh, that's bullshit," Kyle says. "Wendy said jump and you asked how high."

"What?" Stan turns to glare at him. "That's not – I don't do everything she says."

"Yeah? You don't go crawling back every time she curls her finger, no matter what –"

"No! And that's really rich, coming from you."

"Coming from me?" Kyle's heart is pounding. He feels close to saying everything, on the off chance that some of it would hurt Stan.

"You don't know how many times she broke up with me because I was –" Stan hesitates, his mouth hanging open.

"Because you were what? Too much of a fucking pussy? Too willing to do everything she wanted?"

"Because I ditched her for you!" Stan says, throwing his arms out. "Because you were at home, alone, waiting for me, and I had to – to –"

"To what?" This isn't the rage, it's something else, all ice and no fire. "To take care of me? The way you take care of Kenny? The way you're so worried about fucking *Cartman's* feelings that you'd fuck up my only week with you all summer just so he doesn't sit at home crying over something Wendy said? You're such a great guy, Stan Marsh. Give yourself a pat on the back. Well done. You saved everyone! And obviously we're all doing really well, especially me."

"You're an asshole," Stan says, crying again. He slams out of the room, almost crashing into Kenny, who enters slowly, wide-eyed, Butters close behind him. They're both cringing. Kyle puts a pillow over his face, doesn't want them to see him.

"Whoa," Kenny says.

"I want to go home," Kyle says.

"Did they have a fight?" Butters asks Kenny, whispering.

"I, uh. Yeah. Can you go find Stan?" He kisses Butters, and the door opens and shuts again. Kenny sighs and walks to the bed.

"Kyle," he says.

"I don't want to talk about it," Kyle says, from beneath the pillow. His heart is beating so hard that he's surprised the bed isn't jumping.

"I actually think that whatever happened just now was probably overdue, and healthy."

"Oh, fuck you, Kenny! You don't know everything."

"So you keep telling me. Are you ready to get out of here?"

They call a doctor to remove the IV, and Kenny helps Kyle into a pair of jeans that he and Butters brought from the hotel. Kyle is irritable and heartsick, grumbling like a petulant child. He signs himself out of the hospital, scowling at the blue PAID IN FULL stamp on the

form. Stan's glamorous football life has already begun. He's lying to himself if he thinks the money was the only reason he chose the west coast. He wanted to get away from Kyle, the boy who sits alone and waits for him.

"Do you want to talk about it yet?" Kenny asks as they walk toward the hospital's front doors.

"Nope," Kyle says.

"Do you still want to go home?"

"Yes, but I can't afford the plane ticket, so fuck it. At least I'll get to spend two more days with you." He stops walking, and Kenny does, too, turning back to him. "You're not coming back to South Park, are you?" Kyle says.

Kenny rubs a hand through his hair and looks away from Kyle. When he looks back, the answer is all over his face. He shakes his head.

"I can't stay there and take care of them forever," he says. "I know my mom will take care of Karen if she has to, and Kevin might help, too. They love her. I've just got to stop trying to save them."

"Yeah." Kyle sniffs. "You and Stan have that in common."

Kenny looks confused. He shakes his head.

"Dude, whatever," he says. "Stan's never going to stop trying to save you. That's what he does. It's his thing."

"He'll have a hard time doing it from the other side of the country. He could have gone to an east coast school, Kenny. He's as burned out on this as I am."

"Kyle." Kenny groans and takes his arm, pulling him toward the doors again. "Whatever. Let's just get the fuck out of Vegas, please. We'll figure this out in California."

"I've already figured it out," Kyle says. "What you said before – you're right. I just need to get away from him. He gets off on being worshiped. That's what the whole football thing is about. Good for him, he'll have a lot of fans."

"Stop talking shit," Kenny says. The hospital's sliding glass doors part for them, and Kyle sees Butters and Stan sitting on a short wall near the main entrance, bright yellow lantana bushy against their backs. They seem to be having a heart to heart, and they both go quiet when Kenny and Kyle walk up to them. Stan isn't crying anymore. He won't look at Kyle, which is just fine with him.

"So, are we getting a taxi back to the hotel?" Kenny says.

"Sure!" Butters pops up. "I'll, um, go inside and call one."

"Here, use my phone," Kenny says. He hands it to Butters, who walks over toward a giant mailbox to make the call. Kenny sits beside Stan and gets out his cigarettes. He takes one out

and sticks it behind his ear, squinting up at Kyle.

"Gonna sit?" Kenny asks.

"No, thank you."

"Suit yourself. You're the invalid." Kenny elbows Stan. "What's next on the agenda?" he asks. Stan moans and leans down to put his elbows on his knees.

"The Mojave Desert," Stan says, muttering. Kenny snorts and grins at Kyle.

"Sounds perfect."

The taxi ride is short. Stan pays the fare when they arrive at the Bellagio. The early morning haze has burned off and the sun is blistering overhead. They walk into the hotel, nobody speaking, and Kyle is hardly surprised when Cartman walks up to them carrying a white buffet plate loaded with breakfast food. He's gnawing on a piece of bacon, frowning at them.

"Jesus," he says. "What the fuck happened to you guys?"

"Long story," Kenny says. He slaps Cartman's shoulder as they walk past. "Eat fast, tubby," he says. "It's time to go to California."

Chapter 6

Kyle is asleep when they cross the border into California, and he wakes up feeling overly warm, a vaguely familiar scent all around him, like baby powder and sour apple candy. He opens his eyes and moans in confusion when he finds himself clinging to another sleeping person, someone's hand cupped over his ear. He's curled up on top of Butters, who is fast asleep with his head on Kenny's thigh. Kenny smiles at Kyle as he sits up and rubs his eyes, Kenny's hand sliding off of him.

"I took like fifty pictures," Kenny says, lifting his cell phone. "It was the cutest thing ever."

"Sorry," Kyle mumbles, disoriented. Up front, Stan is driving, Cartman asleep in the passenger seat. There's no music playing, and the scenery outside is pure desert. Kyle feels like he's dreaming, and kind of wants to lean down against Butters' back and sleep again.

"Don't apologize," Kenny says. "At least, not to me."

Kyle rolls his eyes. He looks at Stan's reflection in the side view mirror. Stan is wearing his sunglasses, a hopelessly dorky pair of Ray-Bans that might have been cool five years ago. Kyle is surprised he's awake enough to drive.

"So what did I miss?" Kyle asks.

"Other than you cuddling Butters?" Kenny says.

"Ugh, God. Yes, other than that."

"Well. There was a tumbleweed. And Cartman said some stuff about Mexicans."

Kyle groans and leans against the window, folding his arms over his chest. He still feels drained from his episode of drunken panic, and he's thirsty, but the water bottle is up front with Stan and he's not talking to Stan right now. Or Stan isn't talking to him. Either way, they're done with each other.

"You feeling okay?" Kenny asks, reaching over to rub Kyle's arm. Kyle nods.

"I'm fine."

"Stanley?" Kenny says.

"Yes?"

"How much longer until we get to this campsite?"

"Another couple of hours." Stan sounds angry, like he doesn't appreciate Kenny being nice to Kyle.

"How about some music?" Kenny says.

"Maybe later," Stan says.

"Yeah? Okay, then you're gonna have to listen to this instead." Kenny rubs his fingers through Butters' hair, and Butters sighs in his sleep, then starts making pleasured little noises and nuzzling at Kenny's leg.

"Oh, Jesus, fine." Stan jabs a button on the radio, and static-filled accordion music blares from the speakers. Cartman awakens with a shout.

"Did you do it?" he asks, looking around frantically. "You son of a bitch - did you cross the border?"

"We were threatening to earlier," Kenny explains to Kyle, smirking. Kyle can't roll his eyes hard enough.

"Yeah, we just drove through Tijuana," Stan says. "There were midgets having sex on the street, just like you said."

Kenny cracks up, and Cartman grumbles irritably, attempting to tune the radio. He finds a country station and turns the volume down. Butters sits up, yawning and scooting closer to Kenny.

"Hey," Kenny says, knocking his nose against Butters' cheek. Butters beams at him sleepily, clutching at his arm. Kyle tries not to hate them for being so happy together.

"How long did I sleep?" Butters asks.

"Just about an hour," Kenny says. He's scratching Butters' neck, pulling those little noises out of him again. Cartman turns to give them a threatening glare.

"I had a dream that I was a dolphin," Butters says. Cartman snorts. "And somebody was riding on my back."

"Goddammit, Butters," Cartman says. "Don't tell us about your dreams of being ridden."

"It's probably 'cause Kyle was sleeping on your back," Kenny says. Butters laughs and looks at Kyle, who really wishes they would stop talking about this. He doesn't even remember falling asleep, let alone slumping over onto the nearest warm surface.

"Sorry," Kyle says again, holding up his hands.

"I don't mind," Butter says. "Geez, Kyle, you're like my family." He looks down at his hands, his smile trembling. "All you guys are. Especially now."

Kenny kisses the side of his head, and Kyle stares at Cartman, daring him to make some smart ass remark. Cartman just watches the heat-rippled highway through the windshield, yawning.

"Hey, fellas, I hate to say it, but I kinda need to use the restroom," Butters says.

"Can you wait until we stop for gas?" Stan asks.

"Oh, sure," Butters says, fidgeting.

"We can pull over here if you want," Kenny says.

"No, that's okay. I don't want to be, um. Exposed to the elements."

"New rules for the car," Cartman bellows. "Butters is not allowed to talk about being ridden or exposing himself."

"Sorry fellas," Butters says. Kenny kicks the back of Cartman's seat.

"'Ey! Don't make me come back there!"

"What are you going to do in college?" Kenny asks. "Who are you going to harass? You're going to have to troll message boards or something."

"Kenny, I'm going to an Ivy League school on the east coast," Cartman says. "Who the fuck do you think I'm going to harass? Hippies."

"It won't be the same, though," Kenny says.

"The same as what? Watching you fags dry hump each other? Yeah, I guess not, Kenny. Wow, I'm so sad."

No one says anything for awhile, and Kyle thinks bitterly of Wendy asking Stan to take Cartman on this trip just to assuage her own guilt about the joke at graduation. Of course Stan did it for her. Like Kenny said, he always wants to avoid conflict. That's the only reason he's still friends with Kyle. He doesn't want to hurt his feelings. He'll juggle eight thousand demands from his childhood friends and his elementary school sweetheart just for the sake of never allowing anything to change. Kyle isn't sure why the fuck he's so romantic about their past, except that change scares him. A vague memory of something Stan said while he was drunk skips through Kyle's mind like a stone, disappearing quickly. Something about football, probably not important. Kyle went to every goddamn game, watched Stan kiss Wendy afterward, then went home to sleep until Stan was done fucking her. Kyle had loved it, too, pathetically: being the one who spent the night with him, even if he was untouched.

"Looks like there's a gas station in twenty miles," Stan says needlessly as they pass a sign for it. "Can you make it, Butters?"

"I think so," Butters says, squirming. "I shouldn't have had all that OJ with breakfast."

"New rule!" Cartman says, shouting again. "Butters can't talk about the flavor of his pee, ever."

"Dude, sick!" Stan says. "It's not a *flavor*. No one's drinking it."

"I don't know, are you sure?" Cartman says. Kyle can hear his smirk and can anticipate what's coming. "Kyle might want to. We all know he loves drinking pee."

"See?" Kenny says, kneeing the back of Cartman's seat. "You're not going to be able to use childhood trauma as ammo when you rag on hippies. It won't be the same."

"Can we not talk about this?" Kyle says, furious with Stan for starting it. He's usually more sensitive, but maybe he just doesn't care anymore. "Unless you guys want me to puke all over you?"

"Sorry," Kenny says. Stan says nothing.

The rustic quality of the gas station where they stop makes Kyle nervous. There's nothing else around for miles, and only two other cars are parked in the lot near the attached convenience store. Butters bolts for the bathroom on the exterior of the store, whining when he finds it's locked. Kenny takes him inside to get the key and Cartman follows. Kyle stays in the car, looking anywhere but at Stan while he fills the tank, the clicking of the meter the only sound for miles. Kyle wonders if he'll actually make it through the rest of the trip without speaking to Stan. He has a sick feeling that what happened in the hospital wasn't the actual friendship-ending fight, just some sort of precursor.

Butters emerges from the convenience store and runs into the bathroom. Kenny is close behind, eating peanut M&M's from a bright yellow bag, and he leans against the side of the building while Butters relieves himself. Kyle startles when the gas pump clicks off, the tank full. Stan walks inside to pay without announcing his intention to do so to Kyle. Since their fight, it's the first thing that's made Kyle's eyes water.

As Stan is going in, two guys walk out of the store, holding the door for a third. They look like locals, big and dusty, older. Kyle watches them walk to their truck, trying to distract himself from how badly it hurts just to see Stan do something without okaying it with him first. He tries to remember everything he said in the hospital, but the fight happened so fast and escalated so quickly. Just half an hour before Stan had run into the room and held Kyle like he was still afraid Kyle would die. Kyle scoffs when he thinks of the spectacle of the two of them last night, how the paramedics must have rolled their eyes at two hysterical drunk boys, one fainting into the other's arms. They couldn't know that Kyle almost died twice when they were boys, that Stan was there.

Butters emerges from the bathroom looking sprightly again. Kenny kisses him, feeds him a few M&M's, and anxiety folds Kyle's stomach in half. Some instinct tells him that the men at the truck have taken notice of Kenny and Butters, and when he looks over at them they're all frozen, watching. They don't look happy about this at all, and Kyle wishes he could give Kenny and Butters some sort of signal, because they're oblivious, Kenny holding Butters by the hips as Butters tips more M&M's into his mouth. Kyle looks at the door of the convenience store, hoping they can get out of here before any sort of confrontation occurs, but there's no sign of Stan or Cartman. Stan is probably in line behind Cartman at the register, waiting for the clerk to ring up eighteen individual packets of junk food. Kyle digs out his phone, his heart racing as he starts to type a message to Kenny, but he's only got two words typed out when he looks up and sees the guys at the truck walking toward Kenny and Butters. Kenny doesn't notice, just kisses Butters on the forehead before slipping into the bathroom himself.

"Okay, no," Kyle says, crawling across the backseat, because there's no way Butters is going to hold his own against three full grown rednecks. Kyle doesn't have much hope of doing so, either, but he climbs out of the car anyway, speed walking toward Butters, who has definitely noticed the men now. He's got his back pressed up against the side of the building, the bag of candy clawed into his hand and a frightened attempt at a smile on his face.

"He'll be done in just a sec if you need the bathroom, fellas," Butters says. He sees Kyle walking toward him and looks relieved, though only marginally. The men stare at Butters for a moment, two of them giving him menacing smiles and the third just watching him, stone-faced.

"Where you boys from?" the stone-faced one asked.

"Colorado," Butters says, everything about him screaming to be bullied, that he's a ripe candidate. He's visibly shivering.

"We're just - we're just leaving," Kyle says. He takes Butters' arm and tugs.

"But - Kenny -" Butters says, giving Kyle a wide-eyed look.

"Seems like it's a threesome," one of the smiling guys says. He's wearing a faded red shirt that's buttoned too low, revealing gnarly chest hair. Ironically, it makes Kyle think of Big Gay Al.

"That your boyfriend in there?" the stone-faced man asks, putting his hand against the door when the knob turns. Kyle can hear Kenny struggling to open it, but when he pushes the man leans his full weight on the door, keeping him inside. Kyle tries to pull Butters toward the car again, but the man with the chest hair steps in their way, his shadow falling over them.

"Look," Kyle says, trying to puff himself up like a threatened bird. He'd be no good at this on his best day, and he's still shaky with his hangover, weak. "Our friends are inside, and they've got cell phones."

"Oh shit, they've got cell phones!" the other smiling man says, laughing. He seems high, and so does the man with the chest hair. Maybe stone-face is their designated driver. Kenny is fighting like hell to get out of the bathroom now, screaming muffled threats, but stone-face is holding the door shut easily.

"Let him out!" Butters shouts, surprising everyone. He runs at stone-face and shoves him feebly, but stone-face is taken off guard enough to stumble backward a few steps, giving Kenny room to throw open the bathroom door. Kenny comes out swinging, red-faced, and lands one hard punch against stone-face's right cheek before the other two are upon him, quickly sobered.

"You fags are fucking dead!" one of them shouts, and chest hair catches Kenny's leg when he kicks at them, upending him. As soon as he's on his back they start hitting him, and Butters jumps on one of them with a petulant growl that would be funny if Kyle wasn't scared out of his fucking mind, frozen in place. He's able to unfreeze himself when stone-face grabs Butters and lifts him easily into the air, laughing at his attempt to struggle free. Kyle kicks

stone-face in the shin, knowing Kenny would want him to rescue Butters before helping him, and stone-face has the gall to use Butters' wildly kicking legs as a weapon, one of Butters' shoes connecting hard with Kyle's cheek.

"Put him down!"

Kyle is on the ground when he hears what sounds like a bullet being chambered. He's coughing through a fog of dirt, assuming they're all going to die, because these psychopaths have a gun. Butters drops to the ground beside him, also coughing, and as the dust clears Kyle realizes that whoever issued that order sounded a lot like Cartman. Someone kneels down beside him and takes hold of his shoulders: Stan. Their eyes lock, and it's like Kyle is seeing him in a dream, far away from the last words they exchanged. Cartman is standing over them, his gun pointed at the three men.

"You know how to use that, fat boy?" stone-face asks. He's backing up but still smiling, seemingly calm. Cartman fires the gun into the air. The two men who were hitting Kenny freeze and whirl around, scrambling away from Kenny when Cartman aims the gun at them.

"Get the fuck out of here," Cartman says, slowly. "*You. fucking. hillbillies*."

"Kenny!" Butters shouts as the other two men climb to their feet, keeping their distance. Stone-face is still close enough to make Kyle nervous. Kyle stays on the ground near Cartman's feet as he watches Stan and Butters rush to Kenny, helping him up. Kenny is still conscious, coughing, his face bloodied.

"That's a real impressive little fag gun," stone-face says to Cartman, still smirking. They're about the same size, Cartman a little fatter, stone-face a little taller. "I got something in my truck you might be interested in. A real man's gun. I could stick it up your ass, maybe."

The other two laugh, but they sound nervous now. There's no trace of emotion on Cartman's face as he lowers the gun and fires at stone-face's feet. Stone-face jumps backward, cursing, and the other two bolt for the truck.

"Stay where you are!" Cartman shouts, cocking the gun again, and they stop in their tracks.

Stan and Butters are helping Kenny to the car, his arms thrown around their shoulders. Kyle barely knows what's happening when Cartman squats down, his gun still trained on stone-face, and tugs Kyle up by the collar of his shirt. Kyle tries to make his legs work, partially succeeds.

"You're real lucky I didn't bring my piece into the store," stone-face says.

"Yeah?" Cartman says. He's backing toward the car, pulling Kyle with him like he's his hostage. "You're lucky I don't like shooting guys in the balls. I do like the idea of neutering hillbillies, though, so maybe you shouldn't push me."

Cartman all but throws Kyle into the backseat, where he clambers over toward Kenny and Butters, his stomach lurching when he sees the blood that's leaked onto Kenny's shirt and the bruises that are rising on his cheeks. Stan has already started the car, and as soon as Cartman

climbs into the passenger seat, still aiming the gun at the men through the open window, Stan peels out of the lot.

"Holy shit," he says, holding the steering wheel with both hands. "Holy shit - what happened?"

Kyle whirls around to look at the gas station as Stan zooms away from it. The men have piled into their truck, and Kyle knows this isn't over yet.

"They saw Butters and Kenny, you know," Kyle says. He's talking to Stan, but it hardly matters now. "Shit, fuck - they're following us. Do you think they really have a gun?"

"I'd be surprised if they didn't," Cartman says. He still seems eerily calm. He leans out the window with the gun still raised, aiming for the truck, which is just beginning to catch up to them.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Stan shouts. "You can't shoot at them!"

He's just finished saying this when a double-barreled shotgun emerges from the passenger side of the truck. Cartman curses and pulls himself back into the car when the first shot rings out, zipping audibly past the car.

"Fuck!" Kyle screams. "I'm - I'll call the police." He's not even sure he could make his hands function right now, let alone his phone.

"Police?" Cartman scoffs. "The nearest station's probably fifty miles from here. No, I'll handle this."

"Are you crazy?" Stan says. "This isn't a movie, Cartman!"

"Kill 'em, Eric!" Butters says, clutching at Kenny, who seems only vaguely aware of what's going on. He and Butters are ducked down with their heads below the back window, and Kenny pulls Kyle down to take cover, too. Cartman is again aiming his gun at the truck. From the floorboards behind Cartman's seat, Kyle reaches into the the front and grabs a handful of Stan's t-shirt. The men in the truck are still firing, an ominous pause between each gunshot, promising every time that the next one will be the one that counts.

"Kyle," Stan says, or maybe he's hearing things. Kyle closes his eyes and waits to hear glass shattering.

"These pussies are terrible shots," Cartman says, and he fires.

There's an explosion, tires squealing, and Cartman whoops victoriously. He fires again, and another tire blows out. Kyle is afraid to look, but he hears the truck skidding off the road, and then there's nothing but Cartman celebrating and the sound of their own car roaring down the highway, Stan doing close to ninety. Kyle is still holding onto Stan's shirt, slumped against Kenny and Butters, all of them breathing hard.

"Holy fuck!" Stan says, and he starts laughing. "Cartman! Holy shit!"

"What, I never told you guys I got first in the statewide junior sharpshooting competition last year?" Cartman says. He's still pretending to be calm, grinning, but Kyle can see sweat dripping down his temples.

"We thought you were full of shit!" Kyle says. He's laughing now, too, though his heart is still slamming.

"Eric, you saved us!" Butters says, jumping into the front seat to hug him. Kyle expects Cartman to retch and push him away, but he just sits there receiving this attention smugly, probably thinking it will irritate Kenny.

"Are you alright?" Kyle asks Kenny, finally letting go of Stan's shirt in order to examine Kenny's injuries. Kenny wipes blood from his face and nods.

"I've, uh, seen worse," he says. He hoists himself up onto the backseat with a groan, checking to see if the truck has somehow managed to follow them. It hasn't; there's nothing but shimmering highway behind them. Butters returns to Kenny's side and kisses his cheeks, moaning at the state they're in.

"I can't believe that just fucking happened!" Stan says. Cartman lifts his gun to his lips and blows across the end of the barrel. Kenny laughs at this, and then they're all laughing, talking over each other - *wish I could have seen their faces, stupid fucking rednecks, that was so fucking awesome*. Kyle feels drunk with relief, feather-light as he helps Butters use the water to clean Kenny's face.

"Do you realize what you just did, Cartman?" Kenny asks. "You practically defended gay rights."

"I did not!" Cartman says. He looks so scandalized by the suggestion that Kyle is afraid he'll turn the gun on Kenny. Cartman huffs and clicks the safety on before tucking the gun back into his pants. "I've got dibs on calling you guys fags. That's all."

"Where does it hurt?" Butters asks, feeling his way over Kenny's chest. Kenny shakes his head.

"Mostly in the area of my pride," he says. "I can't believe Cartman saved us all. Ouch."

"Heh," Cartman says. "It was bound to happen eventually."

"But you were so brave, Kenny!" Butters takes hold of Kenny's face, obviously resisting the urge to go whole hog and straddle his lap. "Eric had a gun, you only had your fists. And you got that big guy right in the jaw!"

"And you're the one who'll have the kick ass black eye to make you look tough," Kyle says. He touches the skin around Kenny's left eye, wincing. "We should stop somewhere to get some ice."

"Duh," Stan says, and it stabs through Kyle. So they're still fighting. He's not sure why he thought yet another near-death experience would change that. Maybe it was the way Stan fell

to his side during the altercation, or the understanding that seemed to pass between them when they looked at each other, something bigger than forgiveness. He thinks of the way he talked to Stan in the hospital room, that condescending bullshit about Stan needing to save everybody. He's not sure how else he was expected to respond to Stan's news that he had to ditch his girlfriend to spend time with lonely Kyle, which wasn't really news to Kyle at all.

They wait an hour and a half to stop, for fear that the guys in the truck might catch up with them. The diner where they pull over is crowded enough that Kyle feels relatively safe, though his heart is still pounding after that ordeal. He feels exposed, back in the real world where not everyone will be okay with Kenny kissing Butters in public. They're not in South Park anymore, and three of them won't be going back there for awhile. Kyle cringes when he thinks of a plane ride home with only Cartman for company.

“This doesn't bode well for my amateur porn career,” Kenny says, looking at his reflection in the diner's front window. He's holding a makeshift ice pack against his eye, the melting ice cubes beginning to bleed through three layers of napkins.

“Whatever,” Stan says. “You'll have awesome scars.”

The diner is packed with bikers. Their table doesn't get any long looks, not even from the waitress, despite Kenny's condition and the disheveled look of the rest of them. Kyle eats a fried chicken sandwich ravenously, alarmed when he realizes that he didn't think to wash his hands before touching it.

“I hope nobody has any major objections to camping tonight,” Stan says. “It's the last time I'll be able to do it for awhile.”

Kyle sniffs, thinking of Stan's signing bonus. They could afford a luxury resort in Palm Springs, but Stan would rather sleep among the lizards. He told Kyle the reason they were going to camp during this trip was to save money. He lied to Kyle's face, and Kyle still doesn't understand why. There's never been any jealousy between them when it comes to money, and Stan knows Kyle has always lived comfortably enough not to harbor any sort of financial envy. Stan must have been telling the truth in the hospital room: he wanted everything to be like it was when they were kids, and he knew Kyle wouldn't let him have it without being fed lies about needing to save money. Kyle feels like announcing the secret about the signing bonus to the whole table, though he's not sure what that would accomplish.

“Man,” Kyle says, dragging a french fry through ketchup. “You know what I just realized?”

“Cartman is actually good at something?” Kenny says.

“'Ey, fuck you!”

“It's still blowing my mind, dude,” Kenny says.

“No,” Kyle says. “Me and Cartman are the only ones who are going back to South Park.” He looks up from his fries. “Stan won't be back until Thanksgiving break, and Kenny – I don't know, Kenny, when do you think you'll come back?”

“Not for fucking Thanksgiving,” Kenny says. “The grocery store used to donate a turkey, and my mom would always fuck up trying to cook it, and we'd end up drooling over the food commercials that came on during the football game. Goddamn.” He steals one of Kyle's fries. “Depressing.”

“I never liked Thanksgiving much, either,” Butters says. “My mom's whole family would come, and I'd have to do all the dishes. And I always got the short half of the wishbone, and everyone would laugh.” He rubs Kenny's shoulder. “We'll have our own special Thanksgiving this year.”

“Yeah, at the homeless shelter,” Cartman says.

“How can you be so heartless?” Stan asks. He's furious, glaring at Cartman, and everyone at the table is taken aback, even Kenny and Butters.

“Well, where the fuck else are they going to live?” Cartman asks, sputtering. “What are they going to do for money? I'm just being realistic, here, Stan.”

“You're being an insensitive shit,” Kyle says, hoping Stan will at least look at him. He does, but only quickly.

“I'm going to help them,” Stan says. “They won't be homeless.”

“You don't have to,” Kenny says, and Stan turns his angry glare on him.

“I know that,” he says. “Have some fucking humility and just accept that I have faith in you, okay? I never helped you because I felt like I had to. I helped you because you're like my fucking brother, you dumb shit. Jesus.” Stan gets up, shoving at Cartman. “Get out of the way.”

“Stan,” Kenny says. “Dude, what –”

“No, you know what, I need to be by myself for a sec,” Stan says. He's so desperate to get out of the booth that he actually climbs over Cartman, who grumbles in complaint. Kyle stares down at his french fries as Stan slams out of the diner's front door, the bells on the handle clanging irritably.

Nobody says anything for awhile, but Kyle can feel Kenny waiting to speak, and when he does he says exactly what Kyle expected him to.

“You should go after him.” Kenny pokes Kyle's shoulder when he doesn't look up from his plate.

“He said he wants to be alone,” Kyle says. “And I'm the last person he wants to talk to.”

“Alright, enough faggy melodrama for one meal,” Cartman says, standing. “I gotta go make a phone call.” He saunters outside, leaving Kyle with Kenny and Butters, who are both staring at him.

“Fine,” Kenny says with a groan. He gets up and stretches with a groan, wincing and clutching at his ribs when he takes it too far. “I guess I'll have to go after him myself. I'm the one who upset him, anyway. Or so he would have us believe. Which sounds kind of familiar. Just saying.”

Kyle is left sitting with Butters, and as soon as the door closes behind Kenny, awkwardness descends. Though they were in AP classes together and have known each other since pre-school, Kyle suddenly can't recall a single conversation he's had with Butters on a one-on-one basis. They both examine things on the table for a few minutes, Butters playing with sugar packets and Kyle drawing patterns in the condensation on his water glass.

"So, hey," Kyle says, turning to Butters. "I never congratulated you on getting second in our class. That's really awesome, dude."

"Thanks, Kyle!" Butters says, brightening. "You got third in the class, right?"

"Yes," Kyle says, wondering why he felt he had to point that out. Butters nods.

"It was a real close race."

"Yep. So, um. Stan mentioned you were planning on going to school in Cincinnati?"

"Well." Butters looks back to his sugar packets, which he's arranging in a flower pattern. "It was a seminary school my parents picked for me, and I don't think I can afford to go there now that I've run away from home. But I didn't really want to, anyway."

"You should apply to some schools in California," Kyle says. "Or wherever - you'd definitely get an interview, with your grades, and if you explained your financial situation they'd probably give you help."

"You think so?"

"Yeah, I don't see why not. People are sympathetic to kids who've been kicked out 'cause they're gay. Or anyway, they should be."

"Those fellas at the gas station didn't seem too sympathetic," Butters says, adjusting the pink petals on his sugar packet flower.

"Don't worry about those assholes," Kyle says. "Most people aren't like them."

"I don't know, Kyle." Butters looks out the window, but there's no sign of Stan or Kenny. Cartman is walking around outside, grinning as he talks to someone on his cell phone. "My parents said I'd be miserable if I tried to live the life of a deviant. I guess I thought as long as I was with Kenny I'd be just fine, but that was pretty scary."

"I know," Kyle says. "I was scared, too. But it's not worth lying to yourself, you know? Being scared?" He almost laughs out loud at his own hypocrisy, though he hasn't really lied to himself about his feelings since middle school. It's more of a lie by omission, but for someone who has nothing to gain by being honest, he still feels it's the right course of action.

"I love him so much," Butters says, absently. He's staring out the window, and for a moment it seems like he's forgotten Kyle is there.

"He loves you, too, dude," Kyle says. "Me and Stan were just saying that we've never seen him like this."

"When those guys were hitting him," Butters says. His fists curl up on the tabletop. "I kinda wanted Eric to kill 'em all."

"I'm pretty sure Kenny wanted that, too," Kyle says. "But at least this way we don't have to get interviewed by the police. And Kenny's alright, it's just a few cuts and bruises. And maybe a cracked rib."

"My dad tried to hit him when he found us together," Butters says. "It was real scary. Kenny had to jump out the window, and I was sure I heard his leg break, but he was fine the next day."

"Kenny is oddly resilient," Kyle says, wishing that he would return. "And actually, dude, you are, too. You guys are gonna be okay."

"Oh, I know," Butters says. He smiles at Kyle shyly. "How about you, though? Are you gonna be okay?"

"Me?" Kyle huffs like he can't imagine what Butters is talking about. "I'm fine. Why? Is Kenny worried about me or something?"

"Yeah, a little."

"He talks about me to you?" Kyle asks, not sure if he should be angry about this.

"Sure!" Butters says. "You, and Stan, sometimes even Eric - we talk about everything. Like you and Stan, I guess."

"Not anymore," Kyle says, though the last person he wants to discuss this with is Butters. Or maybe Cartman, but Butters is a close second. "You're lucky, though. It's great, being able to talk about everything with someone." He's never really had that with Stan, who never bothered with the charade of asking Kyle who his crushes were. Kyle appreciated that, once.

"You two will make up," Butters says. He rubs Kyle's back. "It's just a little fight."

"It's not so little," Kyle says. "Especially since we're about to separate forever."

"Not forever! How about Thanksgiving?"

"He'll be all different by then. Playing college football is gonna change him." Kyle didn't mean to say any of this out loud, but Butters has a semi-hypnotic presence. This must be why Kenny started going to him when Kyle and Stan's attention started to feel smothering.

"Well, I'll tell you one thing that'll never change," Butters says, his voice getting louder as if he's about to make a great oration. "And that's how much Stan likes you. Ya'll are super best

friends, even when you're mad at each other. Some football playing isn't going to change that. Heck, Stan's been playing football for years!"

"This is different, Butters. He'll be playing on TV. ESPN will want to interview him. Girls all over the country will know who he is."

"What does some girls knowing who he is matter?"

"He's really cute, obviously!" Kyle says, beginning to get enraged by Butters' obliviousness. "They're gonna want to sleep with him, and he's not going to be able to resist, and he'll turn into this huge douchebag who fucks groupies and doesn't have time for real friendships!"

"Yeah? That's what's going to happen to me?"

Kyle turns slowly, feeling for the second time today as if the world he's inhabiting is more nightmare than reality, a kind of snow globe that he's become trapped inside, one that somebody keeps savagely shaking every time he thinks he's figured out how to breathe in its glitter-choked water. Stan is there, towering over their table, his expression so bereft of forgiveness that Kyle almost doesn't recognize him. *They always forgive you.* Cartman said that. Like so many things Cartman says, it's not true.

"Stan," Kyle says, feigning exasperation, as if Stan misheard that. Kyle is just praying Stan didn't hear him describing him as *cute*, will have to worry about the rest later.

"I just spent ten minutes listening to Kenny bullshit about how I should be nice to you," Stan says. "I don't know how you managed to get him back on your side, but he didn't hear what you said to me at the hospital."

"What did I say to you?" Kyle asks, furious, his face getting hot. "The truth? Hurts, yeah? Like how you only stayed friends with me because you felt sorry for me?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Stan asks. They've got an audience now, the bikers and a few waitresses turning from the counter.

"You blamed me for causing problems between you and Wendy!" Kyle says, trying to keep his voice low. He's not sure Cartman has enough bullets to fend off more offended hillbillies.

"I did not!" Stan says.

"Yes, you did, you fucking liar!" Kyle jumps up from the table, forgetting to control himself. The rage is a powerful ally; he lets it wrap around him like armor. "'Oh, Kyle, your pathetic ass was waiting for me, you were *alone*, it's not my fault I was a shitty boyfriend, it was all you.' That's great, Stan - I'm glad I could serve as your fucking scapegoat for the fact that you didn't have the balls to break it off with her and sleep around."

"Uh, fellas," Butters says, popping up from the table. "I think we're making a scene here. Maybe we should go."

"Fine," Stan says. He grabs Kyle's wrist and tugs him toward the door. "But this isn't finished."

"Yes, it is!" Kyle says. He yanks himself out of Stan's grip. "It's finished, okay? You'll be in football camp tomorrow and I'll be flying home with Cartman. The end, Stan. You made sure of that when you picked a mortgage downpayment over me."

"Quit embarrassing yourself," Stan says through gritted teeth. He yanks Kyle toward the door again, and Kyle wants to fight free, to hit him, but they don't need anymore attention than they already have, so he lets Stan pull him out into the parking lot, the harsh sunlight blinding him for a moment.

"Whoa, whoa," Kenny says from somewhere within the glare. Kyle can smell his cigarette. "I thought we were making progress with this?"

"Stay the fuck out of it, Kenny!" Stan shouts. Kyle has never seen him feral like this, not even on the football field, and it's alarmingly hot. The sun is so bright that Kyle doesn't regain his bearings until Stan pushes him up against the side of the car.

"You are a hypocrite," Stan says, jabbing his finger in Kyle's face.

"Excuse me?"

"Fight, fight, fight!" Cartman calls from the door of the restaurant, but Stan ignores him.

"You ditched me for the Ivy League," Stan says. "You could have come to my school. It's a good school, Kyle! And *fuck you* for thinking I would ignore you and chase pussy and turn into some jock asshole. You really think I'm that worthless? That fucking shallow and cheap?"

"At thirty grand I'd hardly say you were cheap," Kyle says, hating every word. He watches the anger drain from Stan's features, replaced by naked shock.

"Wow." Stan steps back. "You really hate me."

"No," Kyle says, and he's talking to himself more than Stan, telling himself not to say what it's too late to take back. "Stan, wait."

"Let's just go," Stan says. He opens the back door on the passenger's side. "I don't give a fuck who drives, but I need a break."

"Stan, hang on, I didn't mean -"

"Let *go* of me!" Stan shouts when Kyle tries to pull him out of the car. He can feel the others watching them, even Cartman saying nothing.

"I don't want to let you go," Kyle says, quietly enough that no one else will hear. "Please, Stan, listen -"

"I've listened. You think I'm a disloyal prick who wants to get famous and fuck a lot of chicks. That's great, Kyle. After sixteen years, you know me really well. Congratulations."

"I applied to UCLA, okay!" Kyle feels like someone else is confessing this, a person he has no control over. Stan finally looks at him, frowning.

"What?"

"I got in." Kyle is shaking, holding on to the door of the car as if it's attached to a train that will take Stan away. "I got in, but no scholarship. So I couldn't accept. I would have, but I couldn't."

"Your parents -"

"My dad's firm hasn't done that well since the economy tanked," Kyle says. It feels like the first time he's talked to Stan in months, and in a way it is, because keeping this from him has tainted everything else. "My parents do okay, but they can't pay an out of state tuition, and I couldn't get a loan. My credit is fucked, dude, remember?"

Stan stares at him, his lips parted. He seems to be deciding whether or not he believes this story. Kyle feels like he'll collapse, weightless after what he just gave up, only one piece of flimsy armor left to protect him from Stan knowing absolutely everything.

"Your credit," Stan says. "They really - that *counted*?"

"Yes, it counted! And it fucked my parents' credit, too, because they might have just applied for the cards in my name to try to cover their own asses. No one is going to loan us shit, Stan. Not even for school, not even with my grades. I had to get a scholarship, and UCLA didn't offer one. So that's why I'm not coming with you, you fucking fuck."

Stan says nothing, his face soft with surprise, but it doesn't last long. He pulls himself into the car fully, facing away from Kyle.

"That sucks, but it doesn't change the fact that you think I'm a worthless asshole."

"*What*?"

"I heard what you said, Kyle! Why'd you even want to come to school with me? I would have just ditched you to suck ESPN's dick, right? You should be glad we're not going to the same school, since I'm all about money and pussy."

"Jesus, I was just blowing off steam!" Kyle says. "I didn't mean that, I just –"

"If you guys aren't gonna fight for real, we'd better get on the road," Cartman says, walking to the car, a to go cup in his hand. "Before I have to defend your homo honor again."

"Stan," Kyle says, ignoring Cartman. "Stan, I'm sorry, I –"

"Get in the car," Stan says to Kyle, not looking at him. "Nobody wants to hear your shit right now. I think we've all heard enough of it in the past five days."

"More like the past fifteen years," Cartman says, opening the driver's side door. "Kenny! Butters! Get your asses over here, we're leaving."

Kyle ends up in the front seat, Kenny and Butters in the back with Stan, who is silent, staring out the window. Kyle keeps rehearsing elaborate apologies in his head, then trashing them, deciding Stan doesn't deserve one. All he does is put up with Kyle's shit. He views it as a kind of charity. Stan shouldn't care what Kyle thinks of him, shouldn't want him around anymore, obviously doesn't. Kyle's confession about UCLA barely seemed to reach him, and it was like a preview of his worst nightmare, telling Stan everything and getting nothing in return. Maybe they've actually despised each other all this time, or at least for the past few years. The thought makes Kyle physically sick, and he has to swallow down a hiccup of bile.

"So where the hell am I driving to?" Cartman asks, mercifully breaking the silence.

"Just keep going west on 15," Stan says. "You're gonna exit right onto Excelsior Mine Road."

"Onto *what*? Is that in Endor or Rivendell?"

"It's a real place," Stan says irritably. "Just keep an eye out for it."

Silence descends again, and Kyle finds himself wishing Cartman would at least play some shitty music. He would put something on himself, but all of his songs relate to Stan in some fashion, and he doesn't want hear any of them right now.

"You know what I hate about you guys?" Cartman asks.

"What, Eric?" Butters says when nobody else bites.

"You're all on the same menstrual cycle."

Nobody laughs, not even Butters. Kenny starts typing things on his phone and showing them to Butters, who makes soft noises of agreement as he reads. Kyle knows they're talking about him and Stan, and he's just glad he doesn't have to hear any of it out loud. Stan's fury is palpable in the air inside the car, simmering silently as his phone blurts out "Rockin' in the Free World," the ring tone he uses for Wendy's calls. He just lets it ring until it hits the voice mail wall. Kyle can't hear his voice mail message, but he knows it by heart, and knows that whenever Wendy hears it she assumes Stan is ignoring them in favor of Kyle, who makes the same assumption about Wendy when he hears it. *Hey, this is Stan, I'm not around right now, but if you leave me a message I might call you back.* Kyle imagines weeks, months, years of hearing that message and never getting through. That's what he's got to look forward to.

They reach their destination in less than an hour, setting up camp near the base of Shadow Mountain. Kyle doesn't even pretend to be helpful, just sits on the hood of the car and stares at the barren desert landscape in disbelief. Why anyone would voluntarily spend a night here is beyond him. It's all gray rock and brittle shrubs, the sun harsh overhead. As soon as the tent is set up Stan starts taking pictures of the mountain, speaking to no one. Cartman is sitting on their mostly empty cooler, eating handfuls of Cheesy Poofs. Kenny and Butters are walking around looking for wildlife among the rocks. They're holding hands without fear, nobody around for miles. Kyle has that to look forward to as well, and it won't even be worth it, because he'll risk being hated by society for someone who's not Stan.
Kenny and Butters make their way back to camp, and they walk over to Kyle, both of them

climbing up on the hood of the car to sit on either side of him. Butters leans over to give him a hug, and Kyle forces a polite reception, patting Butters' hand.

"Are you okay, buddy?" Butters asks, his head on Kyle's shoulder.
"No," Kyle says. "Not really."

"I can't believe you didn't tell me that shit about not being able to get a loan," Kenny says, slapping Kyle's leg. He's already got his flask out, and just the smell of the alcohol on his breath is making Kyle's stomach ache. "You really got into UCLA?"

"I really did. But fuck it. I would have just gone out there, and we'd have had this fight a couple of months down the road, and then I'd be stuck at a school where everybody worships his throwing arm. It'd be high school all over again, only we wouldn't be friends anymore. You were right before, in the hospital. I need to get away from him."

"Whatever you said to him back in Vegas really got to him," Kenny says. "I was kind of surprised. Usually he's pretty oblivious. Everything just rolls off his back."

"Yeah, well. Apparently he's allowed to call me on my shit, but I can't say anything about his. I'm supposed to feel better about the fact that he picked a school on the opposite coast because it wasn't just for some money, it was for *a lot* of money? Fuck that. Fuck him."

Kenny puts his arm around Kyle and Butters, resting his chin on Kyle's other shoulder. He seems kind of drunk already, but Kyle supposes he earned it after taking that beating. The skin around his eye is dark purple now, oily-looking.

"I'm gonna amend what I said earlier," Kenny says. "I still think you guys need to be apart for awhile, but not for too long. Not with everything the way it is, all tense and shit. Not for four years. You might not recover from that."

"So what am I supposed to *do*, Kenny? I'm not the one who had a choice. He did, and he chose thirty thousand dollars. Nice to know how much I'm worth."
Behind them, "Rockin' in the Free World" blares again from Stan's phone. He curses and stands from the kindling he was assembling for their campfire, pulling the phone from his pocket.

"Hey," Stan says sharply. "What's up?" There's a pause. "No, well. I was driving, okay? You're the one who says – what? Yeah. Yeah, it really happened. I kind of doubt they got our license plate number, Wendy. How do you know about this?"

Kyle doesn't want to listen to this. He squirms out of Kenny's and Butters' arms and walks over to the cooler. He'll just grab a canteen and walk around near the foot of the mountain, in sight of the camp. It will be good to be alone for awhile.

"Why the fuck would he call you?" Stan says into the phone.

"Move," Kyle says to Cartman. "I need to get into the cooler."

Cartman isn't listening to him, but it doesn't seem willful. He's staring at Stan, frozen in mid-chew, his hand in the Cheesy Poof bag.

"What the hell do you mean?" Stan asks, the volume of his voice rising. "No, I'm not alone. Why?"

"I said move, fat ass!" Kyle says, anxious to get out of earshot before he can start analyzing this half of Stan and Wendy's conversation. It's something he's done way too many times over the years, secretly rejoicing when their arguments escalated until Stan shouted, *Fine, yeah, I think we should take some time apart, too. How about until fucking eternity this time?*

"Cartman!" Kyle shouts. He's still staring at Stan, and he looks up at Kyle with surprise. "Move!"

"What?" Stan shouts. He's walked further from the camp site, but he's louder than ever now, one hand pushed up into his hair as he's going to tear some of it out. "What the – are you fucking *kidding*?"

"Oh, good," Kenny says, walking over with Butters. He takes another deep drink from his flask. "More drama."

"Shit," Cartman says, standing. He throws the Cheesy Poof bag down and pulls his gun from his pants pocket, knocking the chamber open to look at his two remaining bullets.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Kyle says. "Put that away!"

"You guys do me a favor," Cartman says, dumping the bullets out and sticking them in his pocket. "Don't tell Stan this isn't loaded."

"What?" Kyle says. "Why?"

"Say that again," Stan says, his back to them, the phone still pressed to his ear. "Fucking tell me that again. I want to hear you say that again. Because it's fucking insane and I don't fucking believe it, that's why!"

"What the heck's going on?" Butters asks. "Stan seems real upset."

"Shit's about to get real," Cartman says, tucking the emptied gun into the back of his jeans.

"Why?" Kenny says, laughing, definitely drunk. "Did you fuck Wendy or something?"

Cartman shoots Kenny a look, and Kyle guffaws, because that's about as likely as Cartman shitting out another satellite. Stan is still on the phone, still shouting.

"Why the hell are you crying?" Stan says. "Yeah? Well, that's great. No, wonderful. I really appreciate your honesty. And thanks for making me look like the biggest fucking fool in the universe while you were working up your nerve." He hangs up, looking like he wants to punch the phone, then like he's seriously considering pitching it into the desert. He turns back toward camp, that feral look on his face again, but it's not really hot anymore, mostly just scary. Cartman stands up as Stan walks toward them.

"Stan," Cartman says, holding up his hands. "Let's not make this any worse than –"

"Why'd you even come on this trip?" Stan asks, coming at him hard. Cartman reaches for the gun, but Stan gets to him before he can pull it out, grabbing his shirt and throwing him down. Cartman trips over the cooler and lands on his ass. "Why didn't you just stay in South Park and spend the week fucking her?"

"Wait, whoa," Kenny says, shaking his head, his eyes pinched shut. "What?"

"Fucking who?" Butters asks, rubbing his fists together.

"You can't deny that we've always had a connection!" Cartman says, still on the ground, shouting up at Stan.

"My foot is about to connect with your nuts, you fucking piece of –"

"Stay away from my balls!" Cartman says, fumbling the gun from his pants clumsily. Stan scoffs and kicks it out of his hand.

"Now you're gonna point a fucking gun at me? I tried to be nice to you, you piece of shit! And she – she's the one – fuck you both!"

"Wait, what the hell is going on?" Kyle says, so exhausted by these back to back outbursts that he almost doesn't want to find out.

"I made passionate love to Wendy on the night of Clyde's party, and I don't regret it!" Cartman says, his voice echoing around the valley. "Sorry, Stan, but you can't fuck with what fate wants."

"It was a drunken pity screw!" Stan shouts.

"Oh, right, like a chick can come that hard when she's drunk!"

Stan growls and drops down onto Cartman, but he's only able to land one punch before Cartman flips him, using his considerable size to his advantage. He pins Stan against the ground beneath him, holding his arms down easily.

"Careful, guys!" Butters says, his fists pressed over his mouth now. "We don't need any more injuries!"

"Guess why she ended up with me, asshole!" Cartman says, shouting this in Stan's face as he struggles, spitting with anger under Cartman's weight.

"Because you were crying!" Stan says. "She fucking told me, you pathetic tub of shit! You were crying because of what she said in her speech, and she felt sorry for you!"

"Pssh, that was just a ploy," Cartman says, the back of his neck turning bright red. "The reason she was alone, vulnerable to my charms, was because you ditched her, again, for your daywalker mistress. There's only so much a girl like Wendy is going to take, Stan! She's tired of being your beard!"

"Shut up, Cartman, God!" Kyle says, trying to pull Cartman off of Stan, who is so angry now that he's just making unintelligible noises, writhing and kicking, getting nowhere.

"No, he needs to hear the truth!" Cartman says, not budging. "Wendy just got off on dating this fucking punk because he was the only real challenge for her at school. Why? Because he was the only guy other than you fags who didn't really want her!"

"Cartman, let him up," Kenny says, the fit of giggling he'd fallen into rapidly ending. Between the three of them, they're able to pull Cartman off of Stan, whose face is pinched somewhere between fury and devastation, slowly making the transition. Stan pushes Kenny away when he tries to help him up, and he stumbles off toward the mountain, breaking into a run when he's gotten his breath back.

"Fuck," Kenny says. He shoves Cartman, who is still agitated, touching the sore spot on his cheek where Stan's fist landed. "Why'd you have to say that shit to him? You fucked his girlfriend, man. You don't have to rub his face in it."

"I'm sick of his bullcrap!" Cartman says. "He's a selfish asshole and Wendy deserves better!"

"Oh, God," Kyle says, putting his hands over his face. He feels sick to his stomach, thinking of how Stan must feel right now, the depth of his humiliation. "Double Stuff Oreos."

"Yeah, that's right," Cartman says, brushing sand from his shirt. "We both love them. We're soul mates, basically."

"Oh, well, that's kinda sad," Butters says. "Since Wendy's going to Berkeley and you're going to Yale, Eric. Those are on opposite coasts! It's just like Stan and Kyle!" He puts his hand over his mouth, his eyes going wide. Kyle rolls his eyes.

"Actually," Cartman says. "I got in to Berkeley, too. I made my mom send in the registration fee to both, just in case I was able to seduce Wendy during the summer while Stan was at that pussy football camp. Looks like it worked. Fucking San Francisco, Jesus Christ. She's worth it, though. Wendy's a *bischon frise*."

"A what?" Butters says, frowning.

"It's – a show dog, it's a long story," Kenny says, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Okay, um – Kyle? Where are you going?"

"Where do you think?" Kyle asks, grabbing a canteen. "To find him."

Kyle follows Stan's footprints, which are distinct in the sand, winding past brambles and cacti. The farther he gets from camp, the more his mind fills with vision of packs of coyotes, side winding snakes that can kill in one strike, crazed hill people. He can hear Stan before he sees him, and the sound of his crying rips Kyle in half, his own eyes watering as he hurries to him. Stan is sitting on a rock in the shadow of a dead tree, bent forward, his face buried in his arms. Kyle doesn't say anything, glad that Stan picked a rock that's big enough for both of their scrawny asses. He sits down beside him and wraps his arms around him, hugging him hard. Stan doesn't lift his head, and doesn't seem surprised that Kyle has come. It's like this

between them at the best and worst of times. They don't need words. Kyle rests his forehead on the back of Stan's neck, imagining that he can absorb some of his pain, wanting to.

"I'm so fucking pathetic," Stan says, his face still hidden and his voice thick with tears. "My girlfriend left me for fucking *Cartman*, my best friend hates me –"

"I don't hate you," Kyle says, shaking his head, his face still pressed to Stan's neck. "I love you, dude. I love you so much." It feels good to say it out loud, though he knows it will get lost in the shuffle.

"I know I'm going to be shit in college, on the team," Stan says, sobbing. "And Cartman will be able to watch it on TV, and laugh, and Wendy will be like, sucking his cock the whole time."

"Dude, no way. I'm sure she regrets the fuck out of what happened. She was drunk, right?"

"Yeah, but – s-she was just trying to make me feel better. Fuck, *goddammit*. Do you think Cartman really made her come?"

"Don't think about that," Kyle says, crushed to know that it matters to Stan, enough to make him sob. "You know he's a liar. You're always telling me, 'don't let him rile you.' That's all he's good at, dude. Making people feel like shit. Wendy probably feels really bad. You'll work it out –"

"No, we won't," Stan says. He sits up, his face a mess, and Kyle can't remember the last time he saw Stan cry like this, unless their drunken adventure in Vegas counts. "We're not gonna get back together. I don't even want her, Cartman's right."

Kyle isn't sure which part of that statement is more earth shattering, the news that Stan doesn't really want Wendy or the idea that Cartman could be right about something. He puts his hands on his knees, shaking his head.

"Then why, um," he says. "Why let it get to you? If you and Wendy aren't gonna stay together –"

"Because they lied to me!" Stan says, grabbing Kyle's arm. "They fucking *conspired* to get me to bring Cartman on this trip, just to make me feel like a dumb ass."

"Dude, no. Didn't Wendy ask you to bring Cartman before, um. Before Clyde's party?"

"Yeah, but –"

"Maybe she really cares about him? I got mad at you before because I thought you were just like, serving her whims when you brought him along, but maybe you could tell that it really meant something to her, Cartman feeling accepted by us, and that's why you brought him. That doesn't mean anything bad about you, dude. It doesn't make you a fool. You're a good person who wants your friends to be happy." Kyle eyes are watering heavily now, threatening to overflow. "And if I made you feel bad about that, it's only because I'm an insecure piece of shit."

"Kyle," Stan says. He pulls Kyle to him, and Kyle blinks tears out onto the shoulder of Stan's t-shirt, clinging. He sighs when Stan pets his hair, hoping that Stan will hear everything in it, any and all secrets that he hasn't guessed already. "Why didn't you tell me?" Stan says. "About UCLA?"

"'Cause it was embarrassing, okay? I – I wanted to go there because you might go there. And I was too broke to do it, and, just. I've been miserable, dude. I want to be where you are."

"God, shit," Stan says, whispering. "Don't worry about that. Penn State is a better school. You *should* go to a good school, you're so fucking smart. I'm an asshole to want you to follow me just for my football shit, when I'm probably going to suck ass, anyway."

"You will not!"

"I'm really worried about it," Stan says. He lets go of Kyle and sits back, sniffling. Kyle wipes his own eyes clear, then his nose.

"Why?" Kyle asks. "You're so good they illegally gave you thirty thousand dollars. And I'm a dick for acting like that doesn't mean anything. If someone gave me thirty thousand dollars, I don't know. I might kiss Cartman's ass again."

Stan laughs. "It's the money that makes me freak out," he says. "They paid in advance because they believe in me. That's so much pressure, it's making me into a fucking lunatic. And you won't be there."

"Me?"

"I told you," Stan says, shouldering him. "I need you there. In high school, it helped. Like, everyone else believed in me conditionally. Even my dad, a little bit. You always thought I was the best. Mostly because you don't know shit about football, but still. It helped."

"I'll watch on TV," Kyle says, and those four words rip out what's left of his heart, because it's not enough, not for him, but he needs to pretend that it could be, for Stan's sake. Stan sniffles and looks down at his hands.

"I still want to kill Cartman," he says.

"Who doesn't? Welcome to my world."

"Do you actually think him and Wendy could be a couple?" Stan asks, wincing at the thought.

"I don't know, man. They're both kind of, um. Headstrong?"

"I guess. I'm just so freaked out by the idea of it," Stan says. He groans and pulls his hands through his hair, making it stand up at odd angles.

"I'm freaked out by the idea of Cartman having sex with anyone, ever," Kyle says, and Stan laughs. "It should be impossible."

They're quiet for awhile, watching the colors change in the sky as the sun goes down behind the mountain. Wildlife reemerges from daytime hiding places, lizards scampering and birds making irritable noises as they zip across the sky, disappearing into the shadows.

"Isn't it beautiful here, though?" Stan says. Kyle laughs and puts his head on Stan's shoulder, so tired, not ready to go back to camp. All of this will be gone after tomorrow.

"Yeah," Kyle says. "It really is."

It's not the first time they've watched the sunset together, and Kyle would bet that most guys can't say the same about their male best friends, but he's finally come to realize that there's just nobody else in the world like them. Stan's arm is tucked around Kyle's back, and Kyle could stay here forever, listening to Stan breathe, but the light is disappearing fast.

"We should get back before it gets too dark," Kyle says, lifting his head from Stan's shoulder. Stan groans.

"I can't go back there," he says. "How can I face those guys? I'm so fucking embarrassed."

"Dude, you're talking about Kenny, Butters and Cartman. I could start to list all the way more embarrassing shit that we've seen them do over the years, but then we'd be out here all night."

Stan grins, and it's as if he's looking at Kyle from a distance, years into the future, seeing this moment like it's an old picture of Kyle.

"You always make me feel better," Stan says. "When I ran off, I was afraid you wouldn't come after me."

"I'm sorry about what I said at the diner," Kyle says. "You know I didn't mean that shit. I'm just scared."

"Scared?"

"Yeah, of losing you," Kyle says, mumbling. He looks down at his hands. Stan reaches over to hold one of them. Kyle still can't look at him, will end up kissing him if he does, and Stan doesn't want that. He wants to make girls come and score touchdowns, and he wants Kyle to go to a good school, to Penn State.

"I know," Stan says. "I'm scared, too. I hate change. My stomach's been messed up all year, 'cause of dread. I'm supposed to be all excited about California, and football, and being an adult, all that shit. I just want to go back to the beginning of high school and do it all over again. Which is retarded, I guess."

"It's not retarded," Kyle says, still staring down at their hands. It's getting dark; they'll have to leave soon or risk getting lost out here. "You wouldn't change anything, though? If you did it over again? Even the Wendy stuff?"

"Well, I'd break up with her before Clyde's party," Stan says, scoffing. "But no, man, I wouldn't change it. We had some good times. I'm actually not even that mad at her. I was a

shitty boyfriend, like you said, and it wasn't her fault, or your fault. Every time I ditched her for you, I wanted to. It wasn't some fucking obligation, Kyle –"

"Dude, I know –"

"No, I don't think you do. The truth is, I'm terrible with girls. Wendy included. Wendy *especially*. All that crap you were saying about how I'm going to have all these girls all over me at college – that's fucking terrifying, dude. I'm gonna be such a letdown. I can't even –" He stops there, forcing a laugh. "Never mind."

"What?" Kyle asks. "Tell me."

"No, forget it. I've embarrassed myself enough for one day. Man, can you fucking believe Cartman with that gun? Was he seriously going to shoot me?"

"It wasn't loaded," Kyle says, wishing they could get back to talking about what Stan can't do with girls. He lets go of Stan's hand and gets up. "Come on, we've gotta go."

"Wendy was asking me if it was true, about Cartman shooting out the tires," Stan says. He stands and digs his camera out of his pocket. "I guess he called her to brag. C'mere, let's take a picture."

"There's not enough light," Kyle says. Stan shrugs.

"I bet I look like shit, anyway," he says.

"Your eyes are all red. Are mine?"

"A little. I just want to remember this, though." He turns and takes a picture of the rock they were sitting on. "There," he says, tucking the camera back in his pocket. "Now, when we're fifty, we have to come here again and find that rock."

"You think we'll still be able to fit on it?" Kyle asks.

"You can sit on my lap if you're too fat for the rock," Stan says, and Kyle snorts. He wants to ask out loud, since they're in confessional mode, *Why the fuck are you always touching me? Did you lick me the other night, or did I dream that? Are you still going to want me in your lap when we're fifty?* He says nothing, just listens to Stan talk about Wendy, detailing all the ways that Cartman will disappoint her.

It's dark by the time they reach the camp, and Kenny has gotten the fire going. Butters seems to have taken over the whiskey drinking, holding the flask and giggling when Stan and Kyle walk up.

"Here they are, Kenny!" Butters says, slurring. "I told you they'd be just fine."

"Are you guys cool now?" Kenny asks, standing.

"We're always cool," Stan says. "Where's Cartman?"

"He's in the tent," Butters says, gesturing with the flask. Stan snorts.

"Butters, are you drunk?"

"I don't know," Butters says, looking fretful for a moment. "Kenny, am I drunk?"

"Yeah," Kenny says. He kisses Butters on the forehead and takes the flask from him. "And now that Terrance and Phillip have safely returned, I think I'll join you."

"Remember when we got in a fight over who got to be Phillip?" Stan asks Kyle, grinning.

"Yeah. We both wanted to be blond. Like Kenny."

"And me!" Butters says, taking a handful of his hair.

"And Butters," Kyle says. Stan cracks up.

"Look at you two, all cheerful," Kenny says, narrowing his eyes at them. "Anything you need to tell us?"

"Yeah," Stan says. "We're engaged."

"Well, congratulations!" Butters says, shouting.

Kyle does his best to make his laughter sound authentic, but Kenny can probably hear the hurt in it. He offers the flask and Kyle shakes his head and goes for the cooler. There's not much food left: some stale bread and beef jerky, half a bag of tortilla chips. Kyle grabs the chips, eating some as he walks to the tent.

"What are you doing?" Stan asks.

"Bothering Cartman," Kyle says. He actually has some things he needs to talk to Cartman about, though he's not sure how reliable any information gained from him could really be. He takes his time unzipping the tent, to give Cartman fair warning. The last thing he needs right now is to catch him wanking to thoughts of Wendy.

Cartman isn't wanking, but he is in repose, his knees bent, the tent barely containing him. He glowers at Kyle.

"Look what that asshole did to my face," Cartman says, pointing to the bruise that's rising on his cheek.

"You kind of asked for it," Kyle says. He climbs into the tent and zips it up behind him. Cartman sits up, looking suspicious.

"What are you after, Jew boy? I'm not trading you my Cheesy Poofs for those nasty fucking tortilla things, so don't even ask."

"I don't want to trade." Kyle sits Indian-style, the chips in his lap. He eats a few, studying Cartman, trying to decide if this is a good idea. It's probably not, but tomorrow is the last day

of the trip, and he's got little to lose. "Can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"Stan's desperate to get back with Wendy, of course, and I was trying to talk him out of it, but he won't listen to me. Did she say anything about him, when you guys were talking at the party? I mean, I presume there was some sort of conversation prior to the, uh, physical activity?"

"Yeah, we talked," Cartman says. "She said she was done with Stan. I don't know why they have to cling to this fucking sham of a relationship. I figured, after I'd pleasured her –"

"Ugh, Cartman!"

"—That she'd be my girlfriend, pretty much. But the next morning, I wake up alone, naked, with Clyde screaming at me to get out of his bed. She took off while I was sleeping, and when I call her up, she says she's still with Stan and it's complicated. I'm like, 'ey, bitch, what's complicated here? I gave you three mind-blowing orgasms and Stan's only fucked you six times all year."

"God, just, ew – wait, six times? All year?" Kyle counts the months on his fingers. "She really said that?"

"Yeah, the night before, when she was sane enough to remember that Stan's actually a neutered asshole. And after she came for the first time, she said Stan had never done that for her. And I was like, what a piece of shit, and she goes, well, it's not like he didn't *try*." Cartman looks very pleased with himself, his smile widening as he speaks. "She said it was embarrassing, like, he'd get all upset because he couldn't do it, and I was like, bitch, I'm barely even *trying*, we're just getting *started*, here—"

"Okay," Kyle says, holding up his hand. "I don't need to know the details, just. You don't think she wants to get back with him, right?"

"Kyle, I know we're all like, pretending not to be aware of this, but you're pretty fucking gay, right?" Cartman says. Kyle glares at him, his face heating.

"No!"

"Okay, whatever." Cartman rolls his eyes. "But let's say, *hypothetically*, if you did like taking it up the ass, and, *hypothetically*, what you wanted to take up the ass was Stan's dick, would *you* want to get back together with him if he only let you ride it six times in five months? I don't think so."

"Maybe they were broken up or something," Kyle says, thinking back to the second half of their senior year. As far as he can remember, Stan and Wendy only had one breakup, after Bebe's New Year's Eve party, when Stan rung in the new year by shooting fireworks off with Kyle and Kenny in the backyard instead of kissing Wendy at the end of Bebe's countdown. They were back together by Valentine's Day.

"Wake up, asshole," Cartman says. "Stan never wanted to fuck Wendy. She said it took three tries for him to even keep his boner long enough to take her fucking virginity! What a goddamn waste! She thinks he's got some kind of chronic anxiety disorder when it comes to sex, which is a load of shit. If you bent your ginger ass over and told him to come and get it, he'd be all over that shit." Cartman shudders. "He's got chronic *pussy* disorder, in the sense that he is a pussy, and doesn't want to fuck them."

"You're full of crap," Kyle says, getting up. The usefulness of this conversation is rapidly deteriorating. "If Stan was gay, he'd be gay. He's not a bigot, and he's not a coward." Kyle has been over this in his head so many times, and he never thought he'd be talking about it with Cartman, but he's getting desperate.

"First of all, he's the biggest coward I've ever met in my life, and secondly, he's playing college football for a meager living, ass wipe. You think it'd be super fun to be the only gay guy in the locker room? I don't think Stan thinks it would be."

"Whatever, dick," Kyle says. "Don't tell Stan we talked about this."

"What will you give me to ensure my silence?" Cartman asks, smiling evilly. Kyle groans.

"Fifty bucks."

"I want it up front," Cartman says, putting out his Cheesy Poof-dusted hand. Kyle digs out his wallet and gives Cartman two twenties and a ten, leaving him with three dollars for the remainder of the trip.

"Pleasure doing business with you," Cartman says, popping a Cheesy Poof in his mouth. Kyle flicks him off and leaves the tent, not even halfway confident that Cartman won't just tell Stan about this anyway. He walks back to the campfire, where Butters and Kenny are drunkenly trying to roast beef jerky in a pan, both of them laughing. Stan is over by the car, talking on his phone.

"Want some, uh, roadkill?" Kenny asks, lifting the pan. Butters cracks up and falls against his side.

"No, thanks," Kyle says. "Who's Stan talking to?"

"Wendy," Kenny says.

"Oh, Jesus." Kyle sits down beside him, his stubborn hope diminishing. "Don't tell me. They're back together."

"Nope," Kenny says. "He wanted to apologize for yelling at her and to clarify that they're broken up, for good this time."

"Yeah, right," Kyle says, muttering.

"Man, no way is he going to be able to keep her when he's six hours away and she's got Cartman right there, ready and willing to go down on her."

"Sick, dude!"

Kenny shrugs. "According to Cartman, he's very, very good at that. And, you know, normally I'd think he was lying, but that's what we thought when he claimed to be a junior champion at sharpshooting, and, also, he is all about eating."

"God, stop!" Kyle says, putting his hands over his ears. Butters is laughing so hard he's starting to turn purple.

"Speaking of oral sex," Kenny says as Stan walks back toward them. "Me and Butters are gonna hang out in the car for awhile."

"Oh, boy!" Butters says, popping up.

"Goddammit, Kenny," Kyle says.

Kenny shrugs and puts the pan down beside the fire. "Just wanted to give fair warning," he says, slinging an arm around Butters' and guiding him toward the car. He salutes Stan as they pass, and Stan frowns, looking at Kyle.

"Where are they going?" Stan asks.

"Uh, don't ask. And you might want to get the interior of your car cleaned after this trip, just saying. Want some chips?"

"Yeah, thanks."

They sit together by the fire, and Stan tells Kyle about his conversation with Wendy, their agreement to make no attempt at a long distance relationship. Stan wonders if she'll attempt to have one with Cartman, and Kyle doesn't have the heart to tell him that Cartman will be at Berkley, too. He can't stop thinking about what Cartman said, only half-listening to Stan when he starts talking about which coastal town they should stay in tomorrow night. Stan couldn't get it up for his first time with Wendy. Would she tell Cartman that if it wasn't true? Would Cartman make it up just to fuck with Kyle? He wishes he could talk to Wendy, but she'd be twice as condescending as Cartman, full of assumptions, and probably not as willing to talk about how she failed to arose Stan.

The rest of the night is blissfully free of incident. There are no surprise phone calls, no blow out fights, no freak rain storms. Cartman stays in the tent, and Kenny and Butters sleep in the backseat of the car. Stan puts out the fire and unzips his sleeping bag, flattening it so that there's room for two. Kyle climbs onto it with him, pulling the blanket they've been using up to his chin. They stay awake for a long time, talking and pointing at the stars, which glitter across the wide open sky like their own personal planetarium. Kyle is in the middle of rambling about wormhole theory when he looks over and sees that Stan has fallen asleep. He's lying on his side, turned toward Kyle, his hand tucked under his cheek. Kyle wants to take a picture, but that would be creepy. He just can't remember Stan ever looking better.

"I love you," Kyle says, again, knowing that Stan won't hear it this time, either. It doesn't matter if Stan has chronic anxiety sex disorder or just wants to bone girls so that the other

guys in the locker room won't hate him. The day after tomorrow, Kyle will get on a plane and fly home to South Park. He'll text Stan fifty times on the trip home, but it won't matter much. He'll be getting farther from Stan with every passing second, until he's back in the place that won't feel like home without him.

In the morning, Kyle wakes up to the sound of Stan cleaning up the campsite, packing their things away. He sits up, the blanket still draped around his shoulders, and looks toward the tent.

"He hasn't emerged yet?" Kyle says, and Stan looks up from the half-melted beef jerky that he's attempting to scrape from his frying pan.

"Who, Cartman?" Stan says. "No, he's still snoring. I can hear it from here. Will you go wake him up? We need to get moving."

"Stan?"

"Yeah?" He's scraping at the beef jerky again, using a rock.

"Today is our last day."

Stan looks up at Kyle again. He seems confused for a moment, then just sad. He nods.

"We still have one more night, though," he says. "We'll get a hotel on the beach." He grins. "My treat."

"Goddamn right it'll be your treat," Kyle says. He rolls up the sleeping bag and blanket and goes to wake Cartman. The desert is already beginning to heat up, the sun burning away the haze of morning. In an hour it'll be ninety-five degrees, but Kyle doesn't want to leave. He doesn't want to see the coast.

Cartman tells him to fuck off. Kyle goes to put the sleeping bag in the car, leaving the tent unzipped. Kenny and Butters are stretched across the backseat, still asleep, Butters curled up on Kenny's chest like a kitten. Kenny has his hood pulled over his eyes, and he adjusts it when Kyle knocks on the window, glowering up at him.

"Hungover?" Kyle asks, opening the door. Kenny moans and rubs at his eyes in answer. Butters wakes with a whimper, squinting up at Kyle.

"Kenny?" he says, his voice tiny and tired.

"Yeah, baby?" Kenny says.

"I think I need to throw up," Butters says. He looks green, his eyes watery and pink.

"Don't do it in the car!" Kyle says, not interested in spending more time in a car that reeks of puke.

"Come on," Kenny says, helping Butters out of the car. "We'll throw up together. It'll be romantic."

They saunter off, and Stan walks to the car, packing the trunk with the rest of their supplies. It's Kyle's turn to drive, so he climbs up front and starts queuing up his music. He smiles at Stan when he climbs into the passenger seat beside him.

"God, look at that idiot," Kyle says, nodding to Cartman, who is cursing as he attempts to deconstruct the tent.

"I should help him before he breaks the thing," Stan says. He doesn't, just sits watching him with Kyle, both of them snickering when Cartman gets in a fight with a tent pole. When he finally manages to wad the tent up into a ball, the poles in his other hand, he walks to the car, looking pissed off.

"Goddammit," he says. "I have to sit in the back with Batman and Robin?"

"Looks that way," Stan says. "Shove that thing in the trunk."

They stare at each other for a moment, as if they're both wondering if they should resume their fist fight or at least hurl a few insults for good measure. Cartman mutters something about tents being for fucking hippies and walks around to the trunk, stuffing the tent in with everything else. Kenny and Butters return looking pale and exhausted, and Kyle starts the car.

"There'd better not be any stains back here," Cartman says, climbing into the back. Kenny opens the door on the other side and stops Butters from sitting in the middle.

"But I'm the smallest!" Butters says. "Your legs are too long for the middle."

"I'll manage," Kenny says, getting in. "I don't want any part of you touching any part of Cartman."

"I don't want to touch him, either!" Cartman says. Kyle laughs and starts up his first song.

"Where am I going?" he asks, pulling back onto the road once they're all in the car.

"Head back toward 15," Stan says. "We can stop for breakfast in Barstow. I'll look up a hotel for tonight – is everybody okay with Long Beach?"

"Sounds fine," Kenny says. He's got his arm around Butters, who seems to be asleep again, moaning softly.

"Are you two okay?" Kyle asks, meeting Kenny's eyes in the rearview mirror.

"We'll survive," Kenny says. He smiles, and Kyle wants to believe him. He's been so fixated on his own dread that he hasn't given much thought to what Kenny and Butters must be going through. When this little party breaks up, they won't be going home or to school. They'll have Stan, but he'll be busy with football, and Kenny won't let Stan be his wealthy benefactor, even if he does accept some help. Kyle wishes he could help, too, but he's got his own problems, financial and otherwise.

They eat at a Waffle House in Barstow, Kenny and Butters just picking at their food. Butters excuses himself to be sick again at one point, and returns looking awful. He wilts toward

Kenny in the booth, obviously wanting to put his head on his shoulder. Kyle is relieved when he doesn't, for the sake of avoiding another altercation. Listlessly, he wonders if he'll have a boyfriend at college, if they'll hold hands in cafes and expect the academic clientèle to find it charming instead of disturbing. The mental image is pretty disturbing to Kyle, who replaces the lanky, spectacled boyfriend with Stan, the coffee shop with the couch in Stan's apartment, and the hand holding with hardcore sex, Kyle riding Stan while Stan sucks on his nipples. He thinks of what Cartman said last night, that Stan would jump him if he just bent over. Kyle toys with his fork and thinks about bending over, metaphorically. It's still too terrifying, so he goes back to fantasizing about doing it more literally.

"Hey," Stan says, grabbing Kyle's wrist, knocking him out of his attempt to imagine what it would feel like to have Stan inside him. "Ready to go? I paid for yours."

"Thanks," Kyle says, dazed.

Back in the car, Stan driving now, the desert gives way to farmland, which disappears behind them as they drive through rolling hills packed with expensive-looking houses. Kyle spots the ocean in the distance, an endless blue haze.

"There it is," Stan says, though they've all noticed it by now: their final destination. Stan picked out a hotel in Long Beach over breakfast, while Kyle was thinking about riding him.

"Alright, enough of this hippie ass music," Cartman says, leaning into the front seat to mess with the radio. He unplugs Kyle's mp3 player and drops it into his lap, replacing it with his own. Kyle is too distracted by his heartbreak to protest. Cartman picks a song and drops into the back.

"Dude, are you serious?" Stan says, laughing. "This was the theme song to The O.C."

"So?" Cartman says. "It's about California."

"I love this song!" Butters says.

"I miss that show," Kenny says. "Me and Kevin used to get high and watch it."

"Here's to the good old days," Stan says, turning up the volume. They drive down toward a lower elevation as the song plays, and when it ends they're stopped a red light, in the midst of actual traffic. It's weird after driving in the desert; all the cars look too clean. The next song on Cartman's playlist comes on, and Kyle laughs. It's "Bad Touch," something Kyle hasn't heard since elementary school.

"Ooh, I love this song!" Butters says, and Kenny laughs.

"You love every song," he says. "Man, remember when we thought this song was so bad ass? I used to know all the lyrics."

"I still know all the lyrics," Stan says.

"Who the fuck doesn't?" Cartman says. "Turn it up, Kyle."

He does, and Cartman starts singing along, everyone cracking up. Kenny comes in on "and I bet you'll feel nuts," and Stan starts trying to keep up, too, laughing out the words. Kyle is surprised how many of the lyrics he remembers when he starts to sing it, too. Butters is the loudest and most enthusiastic, and Kyle imagines him listening to this on his headphones to hide it from his parents, mouthing the words. Stan used to think this song was hilarious, and Kyle would blush when they listened to it together, afraid his mother would hear. Now it seems as harmless as the colored blocks they played with as kids. He turns it up louder during the instrumental break, and they're all singing in unison when the lyrics start up again, Stan throwing out hand gestures that look like gang signs.

For the rest of the drive at least one and often all of them are singing along to whatever dated song comes up on Cartman's play list, unembarrassed. By the time they're following the signs to Long Beach, Butters and Cartman are belting out the lyrics of "I Wanna Love You Forever," by Jessica Simpson – the club remix. Kyle is laughing so hard he feels like he'll puke, glad for the distraction, because they're almost there, and the next time he gets in this car Stan will be driving him to the airport.

"Is it weird that this is turning me on?" Kenny asks as Butters shouts out, *I can feel you loving me*, his tinny little voice almost buried under Cartman's.

"I'm gonna pee my fucking pants," Stan says, his face bright red from laughing, shoulders jumping. Butters and Cartman go on undeterred, Butters doing his tap dance hand motions and Cartman closing his eyes for emphasis. Kyle wishes he had a video of this, though he knows no attempt to bottle this moment up would do it justice. They're never going to be kids together again, not like this.

"Here we are," Stan says when they're pulling into the parking lot of the Comfort Inn & Suites. "We survived."

When he parks the car, they all sit there for a moment, and Kyle wants to tell Stan that he was right: to bring Cartman, to camp when they could have afforded hotels, to say that if he went back he'd do it all the same.

"Hey," Kenny says, and he puts his hand out, holding it between Kyle and Stan's seats. Butters puts his hand on top of Kenny's, and Stan covers their hands with his. Kyle cups his hand over Stan's. They all look at Cartman, who rolls his eyes.

"This is so faggy," he says, but he slaps his hand on top of the pile. Kyle never thought he'd see the day when Cartman touched him and he didn't recoil; his palm is freakishly soft.

"We survived," Kenny says. "If we can survive South Park, I think we can do anything."

"Alright," Cartman says, taking his hand away. He throws open the car door. "I'm getting out before somebody gets his period."

There's a uniform gray cloud cover stretching from the shore and out over the ocean, and the wind feels cold compared to the airless desert. Their hotel is close to the boardwalk, a ferris wheel visible over the rooftops of the nearby buildings. Kyle can smell the ocean. It's across the street from the hotel, a steady stream of beach-goers waiting to cross on both sides,

despite the gloomy weather. As soon as they've walked across the parking lot, they all disperse: Kenny lingers outside to have a cigarette, Cartman slinks away with his phone, and Stan goes to the counter to get their room. Kyle heads for the men's room in the lobby, thinking of washing his hands, and Butters follows him in.

"Have you ever been to California?" Butters asks as he unzips at the urinals, Kyle soaping his hands in the sink.

"Yeah," Kyle says. "We lived in San Francisco for, like, two weeks. Have you been?"

"Not to San Francisco," Butters says. "But I've been here, Los Angeles. My aunt and uncle live here."

"Seriously? Dude, perfect! Could you and Kenny stay with them?"

"Oh, no, my uncle and I don't really get along."

"I can't imagine you not getting along with someone, Butters."

"Well, it's more like, um, he did some stuff when I was a kid, and I don't like him." Butters zips up and heads over to the sink, giving Kyle his usual unflappable smile.

"Some – oh." Kyle watches Butters wash his hands, afraid he'll say more and glad when he doesn't. He leans over to hug him, and Butters laughs, his hands still in the sink.

"What was that for?" Butters asks when Kyle lets him go, handing him paper towels.

"Nothing," Kyle says. "Just, thanks for making Kenny happy. He's like my brother. Well, actually, he's more like my – son? So, you know, if you were ever going to ask for his hand in marriage, I'd say yes. Or something."

"Well, he sure makes me happy, so it's the least I can do," Butters says. "And you're real special to him, too. He's still pretty worried about you. We were talking about it in the car last night, when you and Stan were out there looking at the stars."

"Everybody thinks I'm in love with Stan, don't they?" Kyle says. Butters raises his eyebrows.

"Aren't ya?" he says, looking confused. Kyle laughs and puts his hands over his eyes, groans.

"Yes," he says.

"You oughta tell him, Kyle. Believe me, mister, I know what it's like to be afraid about that sort of thing. Back when we were freshman, I loved Kenny like crazy, and I was sure he'd never love me back. We'd talk all night, and sometimes even cuddle, but he never kissed me or nothing."

"So, what changed?" Kyle asks. "You confessed?"

"Oh, heck no! What happened, well, it's kinda a long story, but let's just say I was standing in a six foot deep hole in my parents' backyard in the middle of the night and it was getting

pretty darn cold. Kenny found me out there and helped me climb out, and he took me back to his house, stripped me naked and gave me a bath, 'cause I was awful dirty and bleeding in a couple places from all the shoveling. I was crying pretty hard the whole time, and I got in a lot more trouble for getting out of that hole when I wasn't supposed to, but somewhere between the bathtub and the bed Kenny kissed me, and boy, it was worth it, it was perfect."

Speechless, Kyle stands with his mouth hanging open while Butters gives him another hug.

"You'll figure it out," Butters says. "You crazy kids."

They leave the bathroom, Butters skipping off to find Kenny. Kyle feels as if he's sleepwalking as he goes to the counter, where Stan is signing some sort of form. The clerk smiles at them when Kyle stands beside him, and Kyle can tell, or maybe is just hoping, that she's assuming they're together, teenage boyfriends.

"Third floor," Stan says to Kyle, smiling. He's doing the fake cheerful thing that he does when he doesn't want Kyle to get upset. Kyle smiles back as convincingly as possible, and they go up to the room to put their things down. It's bland, some type of pseudo-Native American design on the faded bed covers, a floor lamp glowing in the corner, mauve carpeting, a plastic ice bucket and a noisy air conditioning unit. Kyle takes it all in: the room where he'll spend his last night with Stan. It smells like a cheap air freshener, one of those leaf-shaped things that hang from the rearview mirror in cars.

"Want to walk down to the beach?" Stan asks. It's just the two of them in the room, Cartman still on his phone call and Kenny and Butters headed for the boardwalk.
"Okay," Kyle says, because it would be weird to suggest that they take a nap together instead.

It's still gray outside, and it doesn't look like the clouds will be going away anytime soon. The beach is crowded anyway, surfers in black wet suits bobbing in the waves and teen girls in bikinis stretched out on towels as if they can will the sun to appear. Kyle hates sand and wishes he'd thought to change into his flip flops. They make their way toward a less crowded patch of beach and Stan sits down, pulling his knees to his chest. Kyle does the same. They both stare at the water for awhile.

"That was fun," Stan says. "In the car."

"The whole thing, or are you just talking about that sing-a-long?" Kyle asks, though he knows that's what Stan is referring to.

"The whole thing," Stan says. "Damn. I can't believe it's over. It went by fast, you know?"

"Yeah, but it also kind of feels like we left home about eight years ago."

"That's true." Stan smiles, still looking out at the water. He bumps his shoulder against Kyle's and leaves it there. "So I had this crazy idea," he says.

"Yeah?"

"This hotel only costs like a hundred bucks a night. I bet the ones close to my campus would be even less, since it's not the beach. What if – I mean – why don't you stay? I'll pay for it, and maybe Kenny and Butters could stay with you, too, until they figure out what they're going to do. If, you know, you don't mind waking up to shower sex every morning."

Stan is grinning like Kyle has already agreed to this. Kyle wants to. It makes a kind of sense, even if it would chip away at more of Stan's money. They could prolong this, and Kyle could agonize over what it meant, could pretend not to be jealous when Stan came back from practices talking about the guys on his team, his confidence growing every day. Just thinking about it is exhausting. Kyle folds his arms over his knees and puts his head down.

"What's the matter?" Stan asks. "I mean, you don't have to –"

"You know I want to," Kyle says.

"Yeah, 'cause, like, if you go home, you won't even have Kenny to hang out with, and if you were here you could help Kenny and Butters look for jobs, 'cause you're all organized and stuff –"

"Then what?" Kyle says. He lifts his head but doesn't look at Stan.

"Huh?"

"Then what, Stan? I'd be here for, what? Two weeks? A month? Which of us decides to send me home? You, I guess, since it's your money –"

"Kyle –"

"Then we do the whole sad parting thing all over again, and then what?"

"I don't get what you're asking," Stan says, frowning. "Then you go to Penn State, right?"

"Right, like, but – why – why do you need me here? To help Kenny and Butters find dish washing jobs? Or for you? So you can take the training wheels off slowly? Have someone to go out to dinner with when your new friends are busy? What?"

"Why are you being a jerk?" Stan asks. He looks more hurt than angry.

"I'm not – fuck! Okay, maybe I am, but so are you. Do you need me here to be your audience, or –"

"I need you here because you're my best friend!" Stan says. Now he looks angry, though also concerned, because Kyle is starting to hyperventilate. He doesn't want this to be the moment, but he knows that it is, that it's already happening.

"Is that all?" Kyle asks. "That's all you need from me?"

"What the fuck are you talking –"

Kyle panics and leans over to kiss him, because the prospect of explaining that question is actually more terrifying. He doesn't make it to Stan's lips, doesn't make contact with anything, because Stan reels backward when he realizes what's happening.

"Whoa," he says, staring at Kyle like he just mutated into Cartman. "Dude, what the fuck?"

"Really?" Kyle says. He's going to cry, something unstoppable cracking open in his chest, but it's still far away enough that he might be able to get out of here before he starts. "Really, Stan? You're gonna pretend to be surprised?"

"Dude, you just tried – uh!" Stan looks around as if to check and make sure no one saw.

"You fucking asshole," Kyle says. He was wrong about the tears; they're coming fast now, already audible in his voice. He scrambles up onto his feet, shaking. "I hope you had fun fucking with my head for the past few days. For my whole fucking *life*."

"What are you talking about?" Stan gets up, his eyes still wide, as if he expects Kyle to believe that he didn't see that coming, now or ever. "Are you high? We don't do that. Me and you. It's never been like that."

"You got in a sleeping bag and held me!" Kyle says, screaming this loud enough to attract a few stares. He doesn't give a shit. The tears are clogging his vision now, distorting Stan's image until he looks like he should: vague, untouchable, like a stranger.

"Quit acting like a psycho," Stan says. This is the part where he'd normally grab Kyle's wrist and tug him away from the onlookers, but he doesn't reach for him. "I – you – Kyle, you can't do this to me, *don't do this to me!*"

"Fuck you," Kyle says, and it's all he has the energy for, his sobs getting heavier, harder to swallow down. He makes himself move, walking away from the ocean, away from Stan.

"Where are you going?" Stan asks, following. "Kyle, hang on, wait –"

"Leave me alone," Kyle says. "I need to be alone."

"Where are you going?" Stan asks, again. That's his question after what just happened, not, *How long have you felt this way?* or *So you're gay?*, not even *Can we still be friends?*

"Back to the hotel," Kyle says. "And *don't* follow me." He tries to fake composure, sniffling. "I need to think for awhile."

"Kyle, stop, hey, I – we should talk –"

"Later," Kyle says. "Please, just – get away from me!"

He takes off running, fully expecting Stan to catch up, to tackle him. He's actually relieved when he doesn't. He can't look at Stan right now, can't hear his voice, and the further he gets from the beach the more he thinks he won't ever be able to talk to Stan again. This is world-ending betrayal, and he's not sure which of them is really at fault, but everything has changed instantly in a way that he wasn't prepared for. So this is why people don't confess, why people

take secrets to their graves, why they walk into traffic. Kyle almost does, unintentionally, blinded by his devastation. The hotel is across the street, but he's not going back there. In the midst of the beachfront traffic, a taxi appears like an angel of God, and it pulls over when Kyle waves to it.

"Everything alright?" the driver asks when Kyle climbs into the back.

"Yes," Kyle says, so the guy will leave him alone. "I need to go to LAX, please. Can I pay by debit card?"

"Sure, kid."

And they're off.

Chapter 7

On the last Friday before Thanksgiving, Kyle is the only person in Geary Hall who isn't packing up his stuff for the trip home. The halls are filled with a frantic energy that's making him anxious, everyone celebrating the papers they just turned in or tests they just came back from, looking forward to a week of gorging and slacking. Kyle feels like the entire eastern seaboard is being evacuated for an emergency and he's the only one getting left behind, but there's no way he's going back to South Park for the holiday. If he did, he might have to see Stan.

"Broflovski!"

Jacob shouts this almost every time he walks into their room, as if he's genuinely surprised to find Kyle in his usual place: at his desk by the window, hunched over the keyboard of his laptop. Kyle gets along with him fine, but he's glad that Jacob is going home to Rhode Island during the break. He can't wait to have the room to himself, for the ability to watch porn in peace if nothing else.

"Are you seriously going to stay here?" Jacob asks. He's asked Kyle this daily since he learned of his plans. "The dining halls are gonna be closed and everything. What will you *eat*?"

"I'm pretty sure they're not going to shut down the whole town for Thanksgiving break," Kyle says, though he wouldn't be surprised if some of the smaller restaurants shortened their hours. The town isn't named 'State College' for nothing, and it will be pretty empty until classes resume.

"Won't your parents be pissed that you're not gonna be there on Thanksgiving?" Jacob asks. He's packing wrinkled piles of laundry into his duffel as he speaks. Kyle checked the box for 'Extremely Important' on his roommate questionnaire when asked, 'How important is cleanliness to you?' He's not sure how he ended up matched with Jacob, who hasn't washed his sheets once since they moved in. Kyle washes his every Thursday.

"My parents aren't thrilled about it," Kyle says. It's an understatement; his mother cried on the phone when she told him he wasn't coming back until December. He'll have to cross that bridge when he comes to it, but right now the idea of returning to South Park still leaves him feeling raw and ruined, as if he's back on that beach, eyes closed, lips puckered, swooning like an idiot. He gets hot with embarrassed rage just thinking about it.

"Don't you want to see your friends and stuff?" Jacob says. "You - do have friends at home, don't you?"

Kyle snorts, his face growing hotter. He hasn't talked about anyone from home with Jacob or any of his other friends at Penn State. On move in day, Jacob asked Kyle if he had a girlfriend, and Kyle tersely outed himself in response. Jacob proclaimed this to be 'cool,' and he occasionally asks Kyle if he's met any nice guys, but that's the extent of their discussion about Kyle's social life.

"I have friends," Kyle says. "But they all live in California now. They're not coming home for Thanksgiving, either."

His friends number exactly two: Butters and Kenny, who are too busy being internet famous to get in touch with him very often. Shortly after Kyle's abrupt departure from California, they met a UCLA film student slash amateur pornographer who convinced them to use their mutual adorability to their financial advantage. Five months later, blondtwinksinlove.com is pulling a little over six thousand dollars a month, and Kenny claims that he has an interview lined up with the *Times* about the popularity of their kitschy porn site, which features both hardcore sex and cooking segments that involve Butters wearing a frilly little apron and nothing else, cheerfully making cupcakes as if he finds nothing odd about this situation at all. It might be more accurate to say that Butters himself has gotten famous, through some combination of his screaming orgasms and natural sweetness. People outside of South Park don't really know what to make of him. Kyle has read articles about their site online, ranging from finger-pointing hilarity to overblown psychological analysis of the concept. He's sort of proud of them and sort of horrified, mostly just relieved that they only have sex with each other in their videos.

"I'd better get going," Jacob says. The dorms have gotten quieter already, a few shouts still audible from other rooms but more no stampedes moving up and down the hallways. "Are you sure you're gonna be okay?" Jacob asks, standing at the door with his bags. Sometimes he actually reminds Kyle a little bit of Butters, though he looks more like Cartman, chubby and dark-eyed. He's always concerned about everyone, but with Jacob it approaches nosiness.

"I'll be fine," Kyle says. "I'll be able to get a lot of work done."

"All you *do* is work, Broflovski."

"That's not true." He's started taking long runs around campus, training with the idea of running the Boston Marathon in the spring, and some of the obsessive reading that Jacob would interpret as work is just for pleasure. He's been reading a lot of modern Slavic fiction and American Civil War histories, and the combination of the two is uniquely depressing in a satisfying way. He's stopped listening to music for the most part, because every song is about Stan rejecting him, even the ones without words. Especially the ones without words.

"Alright, then," Jacob says. "If it's late and all the stores are closed, you can have some of my instant oatmeal. It's in the top drawer of my desk."

"Thanks, Jacob."

When he's gone, Kyle gets up from his desk and goes to his narrow twin bed, stretching out on his back. He folds his hands over his stomach and listens as the dorms get quieter and quieter, the sky darkening outside. There are heavy snow clouds looming, and there's the threat of a blizzard. Kyle knows he should stock up on food, but some part of him likes the idea of being trapped here for days with only Jacob's oatmeal for sustenance. He wonders if Stan would see the blizzard on the news and worry about him. Probably not. Stan stopped attempting to contact him back in September, after Kyle successfully avoided the temptation to read or listen to any of Stan's messages for over three months. He doesn't want to hear it: the awkward back-pedaling, the apologetic understanding, the *we could still be friends*. They

can't. Kyle doesn't want that anymore. He wants peace, wants to be as hard and polished as a stone, the kind of guy who surprises people when he finally smiles. So far, at college, he's succeeded in this. Maybe after another month he'll be able to return to South Park without crumbling.

He ends up falling asleep on his back, and when he wakes up the room is dark. The silence beyond his dorm room door feels menacing, like a blind creature that's waiting for him to move so he can be tracked. He hurries to put on a light. Outside, some snow is falling, but nothing too serious. He goes to his computer and checks the weather, glad to learn that the storm isn't predicted to hit until tomorrow. It's looming on the radar like an open wound, pink and red at the center. Boston has already been blanketed in fifteen feet of snow. Kyle has been around snow all his life and has never been afraid of it before, but he's never been alone with the threat of it. He thinks of that night on the mountain with Stan, inside the sleeping bag, how desperately they held each other.

He can't imagine that kind of intimacy now, the way they used to slide together at the center of Stan's couch when they could have been on opposite sides. It was dangerous; he's better off without it. He closes the weather tab and checks his inbox. There's a new email from Kenny.

hey bitch so guess what

Kenny doesn't believe in punctuation.

my sister told me that her friend told her that ike said you told your mother your not coming home for thxgiving

wtf

i mean i guess i get why but listen you could fly out here and stay with me and buttercup he is getting really good at cooking man i am like in paradise here and hes gonna make a big meal and our whole production team will be there

i know your all snobby about the porn industry but their actually really nice people and i think you would have fun

maybe you would meet a guy just sayin

and no i dont mean a porn star you know most of our team is in grad school at the school we dont speak of

speaking of that did you see his last game

man

anyway so hit me up and let me know if you want us to front you the money for a ticket its no problem we are raking it in hand over fist

i dont think butters even gets how famous he is its really cute

he says hello btw and says to send you his love

write back you ass

love kenny

Kyle is smiling at the screen by the time he reaches the end, despite that comment about Stan's game. Kyle didn't watch it, but he read about it online. Avoiding the real life Stan was easier than he expected, the jolt of terror that shot through him every time he saw a new text or email making it easy to jam *DELETE* before he had to consider what it might say, but football Stan is too tempting not to research obsessively. Kyle has a very secret folder of pictures saved from Stan's games, and he'll have to delete it if this laptop ever gets within a hundred miles of South Park. Looking at the pictures and searching for new ones is like self mutilation, so painful that Kyle's stomach will be upset for hours after the initial flush of curiosity dies off, but he can't seem to stop doing it. Stan has started three games as quarterback now, which is rare for a freshman. He's beloved at the school, and he looks happy in his pictures, pink-cheeked and messy haired when he pulls off his helmet. Kyle is pretty sure he's not the only person in this great nation who beats off to Stan's press. He's probably just the only one who hates himself for it after he comes.

Kyle has no intention of flying out to California and spending the holiday with Kenny and Butters and their entourage, but he'll figure out how to let Kenny down gently later. He closes his laptop and dresses for the cold, afraid that the little shops within walking distance might have closed already. He wishes he'd brought his car to school, though the prospect of another road trip was too much for him to bear, especially since he would have been alone. He laces up his boots and pulls on the old green ushanka he wore every day when he was a kid. Now it's restricted to wintertime, and it usually comes off once he's indoors.

The hallways are eerie, so silent that a dripping sink startles him when he walks past the bathroom. He thinks of what taking a shower in there will be like with the emptiness echoing around him while he's naked and vulnerable. Usually he loves finding the bathroom empty, but it will be different when he knows that no one's around to barge in and spoil his jerk off by farting or singing bad pop songs at the top of their lungs.

Outside, the campus is like the set of a zombie movie, everything emptied out, last night's snow covered in retreating footprints. Kyle is heartened when he sees a grad student type walk by in a pea coat, a takeout cup of coffee steaming in his hand. They wave to each and move on, headed in opposite directions. When Kyle sees the little paper 'OPEN' sign on his favorite on-campus market, he breaks into a run to make sure he'll get there in time. He's hungry now, and the prospect of eating instant oatmeal all week is decidedly less romantic. He gets a hand basket and loads it with junk food and soda, his stomach growling. The clerk is expressionless as usual, and while the lack of dialogue is something Kyle usually appreciates, especially when he's hurrying off to class, he finds himself wishing the guy would say something.

"So," Kyle says, feeling out of practice with words, though Jacob left only five hours ago. "Pretty big storm coming, I guess?"

The clerk looks up at Kyle as if he can't imagine what he's talking about. He's a short, older man with giant glasses, and Kyle has never seen him wear anything but this same faded plaid shirt, though it always looks clean. This is Kyle's favorite market because it's cleaner than all the others on campus.

"The storm?" Kyle says, raising his eyebrows. "The snow storm?" He feels like an asshole, hoping the guy speaks English.

"Oh, yes, the storm," the man says. He's got an accent, but Kyle can't place it. "You're going home?" he says to Kyle, suddenly warm with concern.

"No," Kyle says. "Staying here. That's why I'm stocking up."

"No Thanksgiving?" the clerk says. "No turkey?"

"No, not this year."

He pays and leaves, feeling like an idiot. That guy probably assumes Kyle has no family, or that he doesn't get along with them. He's actually missing his parents and his brother a lot, but he'll see them in December. He needs more time to prepare for being questioned in person: *Are you making friends? Seeing anybody? Have you spoken to Stan?* When Kyle came home from California he tried to hold it together, but as soon as he walked through the door and heard his mother call from the kitchen - *Bubbeh?* - he was fucked. He thought he'd emptied his tear ducts between the wibbling he'd done in the backseat of the taxi, the broken sobbing that convinced the lady at the ticket counter to change his flight with no fee, and the panic attack he had on the plane as he deleted that first text from Stan, but he managed more tears in the presence of his mother, who rocked him and pet him like he was five years old again. By dinnertime, everyone in the Broflovski household knew, without Kyle having to say so out loud: Stan finally knew how Kyle felt, and the news was not taken well.

He gets back to his room and tugs off his hat and boots, his damp socks and soggy pants. Turning the TV on makes the room seem a bit cozier, especially once he's got the volume up louder than he's ever dared while people might be studying. He makes himself some instant noodles in the room's little microwave and sits on his bed while he eats them, the blankets over his legs and the pillows propped up behind him. It's nice, being alone, safe and effortless, and he's careful to avoid ESPN as he flips through the channels, not wanting to glimpse anything that will remind him of Stan, who must be back in South Park by now, either having a beer with his dad or setting the table for his mom. Kyle twirls noodles around his chopsticks, thinking of the first Thanksgiving after Stan's parents split up. To avoid conflict, Stan had dinner with Kyle's family. It wasn't long after their first real fight, when they didn't speak to each other for weeks, but once they made up they were more inseparable than they'd been in years. They stayed up late playing Go Fish in Kyle's bed, their shoulders pressed together even as they hid their cards from each other.

The television is only able to hold his attention until nine o'clock, then it just starts to get on his nerves, every other show on ten different channels featuring Gordon Ramsey screaming about something. He turns it off and drags his laptop into the bed. He's got a new email from Ike, but it's just a link to an online comic that he thought Kyle would like. It's something very avant garde and Kyle doesn't really get it. He doesn't have the patience for Ike's sense of

humor, but he knows Ike is only emailing because he misses him, so he spends half an hour drafting up a response, rambling about how marshmallows in Pennsylvania don't taste as good as the ones they would roast over the burners on the stove when their parents were out. This segues into a complaint about the fruity, functionless scarves that people on campus wear, then there's a long paragraph about an article Kyle read about how the dinosaurs might have been bright pink. He sends, imagining Ike laughing under his breath as he reads Kyle's nonsense, smoking pot in bed while one of the Gordon Ramsey shows plays on the little TV he keeps on top of his dresser. Loneliness drops over Kyle like a hood when he imagines himself there with Ike, stupidly high and drooling over cooking shows. He closes his web browser and opens his image folder, clicking through the many layers of randomly named sub-folders until he reaches the one that contains his pictures of Stan.

Sometimes he does this in a kind of thoughtless haze, and sometimes he's irritated with himself from the outset, hating his cock for getting hard at the thought of the pads under Stan's jersey, the way he looks when he's wearing only them and his uniform pants, the bulge of his cup obvious and eye-catching. He's gotten bigger, just slightly, and his posture is better than it was when he stood on the sidelines during high school games, catching his breath. He looks like a guy who knows what he's doing. He looks like a guy who knows how to fuck, though if what Cartman said is to believed, that's not true. Maybe some other girl has taught him, somebody less intimidating than Wendy. Pretty but soft, too overwhelmed by the rowdy crowds to actually attend the games. Stan would take her out for dinner afterward and relive every play. She'd half-listen, admiring him, her dainty elbows on the table.

Kyle likes to torture himself with this kind of shit before getting to the good stuff. It makes it better, which is sick, but what about this isn't.

His fantasies twist away from probable reality and into pure indulgence: Stan in their high school locker room, naked and soapy, coming up behind Kyle and pressing him to the cold tile, spreading his thighs, touching him everywhere. Kyle shoves his boxers off under the blankets, imagining Stan's hard cock pressing between his ass cheeks, teasing him, the way Stan would laugh under his breath when Kyle whimpered and pressed his hips back, wanting more.

Are you still a slut for me? Stan would ask, knowing the answer. He would make Kyle kneel down on the dirty shower floor and beg to suck him. He'd pull Kyle's hair - in the fantasy it's still long enough to pull. In reality it would be hard to get a handful, though his curls are starting to come back in. He shaved them off just before leaving for college, and decided he actually looked worse without them, but it was too late. He did like the hard look of the buzz cut, the inauthentic toughness it gave him. Now his hair is softer than ever, like the first layer of fragile green things that grow back after a forest fire. He reaches up to touch it, imagining Stan's hand there, tugging him forward, making Kyle take more of him into his mouth.

The usual stuff isn't working, and after ten minutes Kyle's cock is starting to chafe. He gets more lotion and initiates emergency procedures, the thing he does when he needs to come or risk getting walked in on, Jacob's classes nearly out for the day. It makes his face turn red, even now that there's no chance of somebody barging in, but it works every time. He kicks his blankets away and lifts his legs, bends his knees, presenting his ass to the Stan who isn't there, tugging on his dick with one hand and holding onto the back of one knee with the

other. He jams his eyes shut and lets the feeling of vulnerability sweep across his skin, this thing that he knows he'll never actually offer to anyone, least of all the person who he wants to give it to most.

"Fuck me," he says, whispering the words into the air and throwing his head back, eyes closed, spine arching. "Fuck me, Stan, *yeah*."

He's close, his hand moving fast now, tears gathering at the corners of his tightly closed eyes. He imagines Stan hovering over him, so big, his cock shoving in and out of him, *so big*, pulling him open, taking him hard. Kyle needs just one more thing, whining now, so the Stan in his fantasy leans down to whisper in his ear:

"She never made me come like you do."

Kyle groans as he pumps himself dry, no one around to hear it. He's shuddering, emptied out, his legs lowering to the bed. He's gotten so good at rejecting the second stage of his fantasies, the part where Stan turns sweet and holds him while he recovers, but he needs it too much now, can't fight it. He pulls his blankets up and rolls onto his side, imagining Stan spooned up behind him, soft kisses on his neck, Stan's throwing arm snug across his chest. It doesn't work, not like it used to. Now Kyle knows what it's really like to lie still while Stan sinks into sleep against his back, growing heavier, his breath slowing. He pulls his blankets over his head and tries to sleep, feeling like he's still on that plane ride home from California, most of which he can't actually remember. Flight attendants kept bringing him water and tissues, people stared, Kyle felt like his ribs were going to fall out of his chest. When he does sleep, he dreams that Stan is sitting next to him on the plane, ignoring him, typing things into his phone.

It's cold in the room when he wakes up, and he pokes his head out from beneath the blankets, remembering a rumor he heard that they would turn off the central heating in the dorms during the holiday. It's still pitch dark outside, no snow falling. He stumbles across the room, squinting under the overhead lights, and flips them off. Back into the bed, he tries not to be afraid of the dark. It's mostly the quiet that scares him, and he thinks about digging out his mp3 player, but the last thing he needs is an hour of listening to those old songs. *Sick of myself when I look at you, don't you think I wish that I could stay, everybody here wants you*. He hears all his old songs in his head anyway, hiding under the blankets again.

Maybe staying here alone was a bad idea.

When he wakes again, he can tell that it's morning, even with his blanket still over his face. He bats it away and sees snow falling heavily past his window, almost a pure white sheet. For a long time he just watches it, imagining that he's being buried alive.

He hears something, distantly: footsteps. They're on the stairwell, then coming down the hallway, getting closer. He sits up and makes sure that he bolted his door. He did, but it's a small comfort when the person outside starts knocking on it.

"Who is it?" Kyle shouts, still on the bed, the blankets pulled up to his chin.

"It's me," someone says, and he sounds so much like Stan that Kyle knows he must be dreaming. Maybe he's just forgotten what Stan sounded like, because when he climbs out of bed the room feels freezing, and he can't remember ever being cold like this in a dream. He goes to the door, pulls the chain back and opens it just to make sure that it's not actually Stan on the other side. When it is him, breathing hard like he ran up all five flights of stairs, his coat damp with melted snowflakes, Kyle can only stare.

"Your hair," Stan says. Kyle reaches up to touch his head. His hair is as it should be, if this is reality: chopped short but growing longer, his curls reforming.

"I cut it," Kyle says.

They stand there for awhile, Kyle half-asleep and shivering, Stan holding the same shoulder bag that they stashed the vodka in that night in Vegas. Kyle finds his voice first, huffing in disbelief.

"What are you doing here?" he asks, remembering that he's angry.

"You wouldn't answer my texts," Stan says.

"I didn't even read them." Kyle has been so proud of this, but now that he hears it out loud it just seems childish and stupid.

"Can I come in?" Stan asks.

Kyle looks down at himself. He's wearing come-stained boxer shorts and a t-shirt, his nipples visible through the thin fabric. He did not prepare himself for the possibility of Stan asking to come into his dorm room under any circumstances, ever.

"I guess," he says, stepping out of the way.

Stan walks into the room, and Kyle watches him take it in: Jacob's messy desk, Kyle's perfectly straightened one, the mussed sheets on Kyle's bed. Kyle has imagined a reunion with Stan so many times, in a million different ways: furious, tender, fifty years down the road. He doesn't know what to say, doesn't even know where to look.

"So," Stan says. "Do you like your roommate?"

"Seriously?" Kyle glares at him. "Seriously, that's what you're asking?"

"I have a lot of shit I need to say!" Stan looks angry for a moment, then helpless, standing on the other side of the room. "I just. I was in the airport for like ten hours, my flight was canceled because of the storm, I had to beg to get a flight to Boston, then I took a bus here –"

"A *bus*?"

"Yeah, Kyle, a bus! 'Cause you won't talk to me, and I can never get away from football, I'm supposed to be in fucking Glendale for the Fiesta Bowl on Saturday, but I don't give a fuck, I need to talk to you."

"You know what, you can go catch a fucking bus back to the Fiesta Bowl," Kyle says. He grabs a pair of sleep pants from the floor and pulls them on, awake enough now to realize that he's half-naked, his heart pounding. "'Cause I don't want to hear it. You're sorry, I'm pathetic, you don't hate me, fine, whatever, great –"

"You think you know everything!" Stan says, shouting already. It sounds absurd in the midst of the empty dormitory, as if they're on a sound stage.

"I know enough," Kyle says. "You – I – made a fool of myself, and –"

"Stop!" Stan says, holding up his hands. "See, this is what happened last time. You started yelling, and I didn't know what to do, and you – you left me there –"

"Oh – fuck you!" Kyle growls in frustration and picks up his pillow, pitching it at Jacob's bed. "I left you? You're actually mad about that? Is that what your fucking text messages said, 'why'd you leave me, Kyle, I can't imagine why you'd react that way when I said 'what the fuck' after you, after –'"

"I'm terrible at this, okay?" Stan says, shouting. "Ask Wendy! I tried to get her to email you, but she said that would only make you angry –"

"*Wendy*? You told fucking Wendy about this?"

"Who else could I talk to? I didn't want to hear it from goddamn Kenny, my best friend wouldn't talk to me –"

"Stop calling me your best friend!" Kyle shouts. He's actually prepared this part, but never thought he'd get to use it. "I don't want to be your best friend! I told myself for so long, that's what was most important, that was what I really wanted, but it wasn't! I wanted to be what Wendy was, okay? Is that going to send you running out of here? Is that what you need to hear so you'll know this is really over? I don't know why you're here, Jesus Christ, I can't even look at you."

Kyle turns away from him, bracing himself against the door, not failing to realize that he's also blocking Stan's only exit. He can hear Stan breathing, can hear him walking across the room. Stan will give him more bullshit, those old easy touches that don't mean anything, evaporating like sugar against Kyle's skin, things he'll think he only imagined.

"You don't have to look at me," Stan says. His voice is tight and tiny, and Kyle wonders if anyone else has heard it like this since it changed, since Stan became something resembling a man. "That's fine. I don't care. Will you listen, though? Can you just listen to me for a second?"

"I don't want to hear this," Kyle says. He's crying; he was never crying when he pictured this, always kept his face stony until Stan left. "I don't want to hear that you feel sorry for me –"

"I miss you!" Stan says, so loudly that Kyle can hear the windowpane rattle, or maybe he's losing his mind. "And I know why you did what you did."

"Great, yeah, that makes me feel a lot better." Kyle wipes his face on his sleeve. "You understand, you get it. That's real wonderful, Stan, thanks."

"I've been watching gay porn," Stan says, his voice suddenly much quieter, though that statement is loud enough to still the air. Kyle opens his eyes, trying to work that out as something he can refute, dismiss, or explain. He turns toward Stan slowly, just to see if he's joking. Stan is red-faced, breathing hard, his hands in fists.

"What?" Kyle says.

"Okay, just – listen," Stan says, holding up his hands. "After you – after the beach that day, all I could think about was getting you to talk to me, and then it was obvious that you weren't going to, so I decided I was going to hate you, 'cause you make me so mad, Kyle, you're so fucking stubborn. Then, I just, you were gone, but I couldn't stop thinking about what happened –"

"Don't tell me this," Kyle says, crying. "I can't hear this."

"Listen!" Stan says, walking closer. "I just – I thought, like, shit. I should have tried it. It's not like I haven't thought about it, Kyle. I'm not stupid."

"You knew all along," Kyle says, shaking his head. "You knew, and you just fucking toyed with me, you made me think –"

"Stop!" Stan slams his fist against the door, inches from Kyle's head. He's standing right in front of Kyle now, glowering down at him. Kyle shrinks and shuts up, his palms pressed against the door. He's trapped, faced with his biggest fear, the thing he's been avoiding since he left California: Stan is so close Kyle can smell the coffee on his breath, and there's no one else around, nowhere in this room to hide.

"Don't cry," Stan says, his voice soft and small again. He wipes the tears from Kyle's cheeks, and Kyle closes his eyes, his chest shuddering as he tries to hold everything else in. He wants to speak, but he can't, not without losing his shit completely.

"You say you wanted to be what Wendy was," Stan says, still speaking softly, still too close. "That was what I was most afraid of, dude, more than anything. All I did with her was screw things up and make her mad, and it was like the more I tried to give her what she wanted, the more I fucked it up. We'd have these horrible, tense fucking dates, and then I'd go to your house, to your room, and you'd be so - you just - you thought I was so awesome, you made me feel so good about myself -" He breaks off there and looks at the window, his voice beginning to shake. Kyle looks, too. The snow is still falling, washing out the world with white.

"I'm not good at, like. Any of that stuff," Stan says. He looks at Kyle and wipes more tears from his cheeks. "I couldn't kiss her without puking, I was a terrible fucking lay, I always said the wrong thing and ticked her off. And it wasn't Wendy, Wendy's fucking awesome, it was me, and I just - I hated the thought of us turning into that. I wanted things to stay the way they were, because it was so easy with you, and you were just - mine, Kyle, I don't care what you want to call it, you were mine."

"You asshole," Kyle says, and that's all he can manage. Stan seems to understand that there's no real malice in it. He's still trying to dry Kyle's face, which is a losing battle.

"It's been harder and harder," Stan says. "Keeping you in this neat best friend box. I know I took advantage of the fact that you'd let me - touch you, and I'm sorry, but I couldn't help it, you were just - so - it was different from Wendy. I didn't have to feel all guilty and freakish if I didn't get hard when I was with you. I felt *good* if I didn't, because it was like I'd won some fight with myself, or protected you, or us, or something - God." Stan winces. "This is so fucked up. I'm so fucked up."

"Yeah," Kyle agrees, weakly. Stan laughs.

"You don't know how panicked I was that day," Stan says. "On the beach, that last day. I would have paid the whole thirty thousand for one more night with you, and I tried to be casual about it because I didn't want to freak you out, but I needed you so much, Kyle, more than ever. Then, you. Kissed me, and -"

"I didn't kiss you," Kyle says, angry humiliation lending some strength to his voice. "I tried to kiss you. You flipped out."

"Yeah, I flipped out! In the middle of everything else that was going on, I just - I couldn't even imagine dealing with that. You turning into Wendy, everything getting ruined, you finding out that I can't kiss, that I'm so fucking bad at this stuff that someone would rather be with Cartman -"

"It never occurred to you that maybe you didn't like girls?" Kyle says, glaring at him. "Never?"

"Of course it did! That was my worst fucking fear in the world!"

"Why? Because it would make you like me? Not the golden boy, not perfect -"

"Because that would mean I could be with you!" Stan is on the verge of losing it now, and Kyle has calmed somewhat, beginning to actually hear some of the things Stan is saying. They watch each other for awhile, Kyle not sure if he should interrupt and Stan looking as if he's having a hard time regaining his voice.

"I didn't want to disappoint you," Stan says. "You've got this idea that I'm - so great - I don't know why you think so, but I would go out there and fuck up on the football field in front of everyone, I'd have Wendy laughing at me behind my back with Cartman, I'd take all of that if I had to, but not you. I didn't want you to find out that I actually don't know what I'm doing most of the time."

"So that's it?" Kyle says. "I was too important to touch? Like some collector's item, still in the box?"

"I don't know, that's how I justified it," Stan says. He sniffles and rubs his face dry with the sleeve of his coat. "Mostly I'm just a pussy. Or, I was. I faced my fear of letting Wendy go, you know, I admitted to myself that I'd failed at that, at making her happy. And I puked my

guts out before my first game, but I did it, and I won, and, um. Have you been watching my games?"

"I've read about them." Kyle starts unbuttoning Stan's coat. It's so soggy from the snow that he might catch a cold if he leaves it on much longer.

"So, yeah," Stan says, watching Kyle's hands as they work their way down his chest, undoing buttons. "I faced two of my three big fears, and I'm still alive. And I wanted so bad to see you, Kyle, but you just shut me out."

"I'm your third big fear?" Kyle reaches the bottom of Stan's coat and pulls it open, sliding it from his shoulders. It drops to the floor at his feet, revealing a long-sleeved shirt that's much too thin for this weather and the Lucky jeans that Stan got as a graduation present from his dad.

"Kissing you is my third big fear," Stan says. Kyle is still looking down at Stan's jeans, then his feet.

"Are those new snow boots?" he asks, the calm that overtook him when he realized why Stan is here beginning to fade.

"Kyle," Stan says.

"You mentioned gay porn?" Kyle says, looking up. He flinches when he realizes that Stan has moved even closer, his elbow braced on the door near Kyle's head.

"Oh - yeah." Stan chews his lip. "Um, I thought I should, you know. Try it. I hate it, though, God, everybody's so ugly. I mean, I guess that's why Kenny and Butters are so popular, 'cause they're cute and young and all that shit. Not that I go to their site!"

"Me either," Kyle says hurriedly, though he has watched a few of the cooking segments out of morbid curiosity. Butters wears barrettes in his hair and uses oven mitts shaped like animals.

"I keep doing it, though," Stan says. "The random videos, even though most of them are so nasty. It's not the *thing* that bothers me, I mean, I think the thing is why I keep watching them, but it's never right, they're always bored or trying too hard or just too damn ugly to get off on. I realized, you know, recently, that I'm looking for something every time I click on a video. I'm looking for this one specific thing."

"What are you looking for?" Kyle asks, though he thinks he knows the answer, that feeling.

"For someone who looks like you," Stan says. He blushes, finally; Kyle's face is on fire. "And then, even if I find someone who has, like, the right color hair, or the right sized shoulders, that just makes it worse, because they're getting fucked by someone who doesn't look anything like me, and I get all jealous and upset and start imagining you with guys at college, guys who know what they're doing -"

"I haven't been with anyone," Kyle says, and admitting this out loud makes his eyes wet again. Stan lets out a long breath, nodding.

"I hated those videos because they were always going to be wrong," Stan says. "Because I was always looking for one of the real you and the real me. That's what I wanted. That's what I want."

He touches Kyle's hair, moving closer. Kyle is all shaky breath and burning cheeks, flattening himself to the door as Stan presses against him, his elbows framing Kyle's head. Stan doesn't look scared anymore. He looks like someone who's about to have a meal he's been waiting sixteen years to eat. Kyle isn't sure that he won't lose consciousness from the overwhelming fact that this is actually happening, Stan's face lowering toward his.

"You can tell me if it's not good," Stan says, his breath hot on Kyle's lips, fear jumping back into his eyes.

"Stan," Kyle says, begging, and then it's happening, in real life, Stan's lips pressing to his, his tongue coaxing them open, pushing into his mouth. Kyle doesn't really know how to kiss, though Bebe tried to teach him when they were in middle school. That was wet and unsanitary, and he hasn't had many fantasies about kissing on the lips since then. If he knew it could be like this he would have. Stan's tongue is warm and soft and perfect, lighting up every nerve and making Kyle hard inside his sleep pants, and Kyle can't stop tasting it with his own tongue, trying to climb Stan for better access. Stan gets the idea and grabs Kyle's thighs, hoisting him up and bracing him against the door with his body, still kissing him, both of them moaning into it now.

"That's good," Kyle says, running his hands through Stan's hair. "That's good, really guh-*mph*."

Stan doesn't seem to need reassurance as badly as Kyle thought. He's confident enough to squeeze Kyle's ass as he kisses him, Kyle's legs wrapped tight around his waist. Kyle wants to be squeezed until he pops, wants Stan's hands everywhere, all at once. Stan is hard, too, his cock rubbing against the seat of Kyle's sleep pants.

"You licked my neck," Kyle says, panting. "In Vegas."

"I know," Stan moans and presses his face against Kyle's cheek. "I think about how you tasted every day. Every time I come."

"*Fuck*, okay, the bed, put me on the bed."

Stan carries him there, sucking at Kyle's neck, and when his legs hit the edge of the bed they crash down onto it together. Kyle is blinded by how much he wants this, and by his disbelief at actually getting it, wants to slow down and take everything in but can't seem to do it, especially when Stan flips him onto his back and straddles him, kissing him like he's never not known exactly how to do this. He pushes his hand up under Kyle's shirt, and Kyle's moan is so deep and hungry that it startles both of them. Stan pulls back as if to check that Kyle is okay, his hand still under Kyle's shirt, resting over the curve of his ribs.

"If we'd done this when we were fifteen," Kyle says, panting, thinking of that morning when they woke up together after the snow storm. "It would have scared the shit out of me."

"It's not scaring the shit out of you now?" Stan asks. Kyle shakes his head.

"Do you know - how much - how often - I think about what it would feel like to have you in me?"

"Jesus *fuck*, Kyle." Stan drops down to kiss him, hard and hungry and huffing his breath into Kyle's mouth as he feels his way over his chest. They both moan when he finds Kyle's right nipple and rubs his finger around it.

"I could see them through your shirt," Stan says, whispering this like it's a secret. Kyle beams at him, because he is a little awkward, and it's perfect, such a relief.

"Put your mouth there," Kyle says. "Your teeth, too."

Stan pushes Kyle's shirt up, exposing his chest to the chill of the room, and Kyle reaches into his sleep pants to touch himself while Stan licks and bites at his nipples. He's going to come, and he wants to, so he can get hard again and come again, and again, all day, pinned under Stan.

"Are you cold?" Stan asks, lifting his head. His mouth is pink and swollen, and Kyle can't resist touching his lips. Stan licks the tips of Kyle's fingers. "You're shaking," he says.

"We could get under the blankets," Kyle says. "You could take off your boots." Saying so makes him wonder how long Stan will be able to stay. He shoves the thought away, not wanting to spoil this, and just lies there with his legs spread and his t-shirt pushed up, nipples red and bitten. Stan is staring at Kyle as he unlaces his boots, and Kyle realizes he still has his hand down the front of his pants. He strokes himself, slow, and Stan moans.

"I always thought about this," Stan says. "How you'd look."

"When I jerked off?"

"Yeah."

"I would have shown you if you asked."

"I would have exploded if you showed me."

"That's the idea, isn't it?" Kyle says. He considers pushing his pants down, showing Stan his cock, but that's still terrifying. He keeps stroking himself while Stan undresses, and he wets his lips at the sight of Stan's naked chest, the striped boxer shorts that are straining to contain his erection.

"Do you remember, in the car," Stan says as they're climbing under Kyle's blankets together, "When we talked about how you were a virgin?"

"Am a virgin," Kyle says. He pulls his t-shirt off, and Stan's hands go right to his nipples again.

"I don't think I'd ever thought about the fact that someone else might take that from you," Stan says. "Not until then, when you were getting ready to go off to college without me. It freaked me out. I never wanted anyone else touching you."

"I waited for you," Kyle says. He finds Stan's hand under the blankets and brings it down to his crotch. "No one's even touched me here before."

"Good," Stan says, his eyes going dark. He reaches into Kyle's pants, and they both stop breathing when his hand closes around Kyle's cock. "'Cause this belongs to me."

As soon as he says so Kyle comes, groaning and holding both of his hands over Stan's, hips jerking. He had no idea that he'd been waiting his whole life for Stan to say that, but he does remembering longing for this: coming down from an orgasm while pressed into the scent of Stan's body, Stan kissing him slow, still holding his dick.

"Sorry," Kyle breathes out. He's apologizing to himself, maybe, for having waited so long to bear the humiliation that would ultimately result in this perfect fucking moment. Stan raises his eyebrows.

"Sorry?" he says. "Are you kidding?" He leans down to put his lips against Kyle's ear, and he whispers like they're not residing in their own private snow-caked castle. "I want to watch you do that so many times," he says. Kyle smiles up at the ceiling, delirious with contentment. He feels for Stan's cock, rubbing it through his boxers.

"Dude, you're huge," he says, whispering. Maybe they'll whisper for the rest of the day, to make up for the earlier shouting. Stan smirks.

"Wendy complained," he says.

"That your dick is big?"

"Yeah."

Kyle smiles harder than he has in months. "No wonder she likes Cartman," he says, and they both laugh. Stan kisses Kyle's cheeks, moaning like he can hardly stand to see him this happy, like it's too much.

"You want me to take them off?" Stan says when Kyle runs his fingers around the waistband of Stan's boxer shorts.

"Yeah," Kyle says. He should take his sleep pants and boxers off, too, since they're filled with come. They both shuffle out of the remainder of their clothing, still hidden by the blankets, which grow hotter when they're naked together beneath them. Kyle touches Stan's chest, running his shaking fingers down over the muscles that have gotten bigger since he last saw them. Stan wraps his arm around Kyle and presses kisses down along his jaw, and there's something so nakedly reassuring about the way he's handling Kyle now: *Don't be afraid of*

my cock, Kyle, it won't hurt you. Kyle starts laughing again, nervously, his hand on Stan's stomach. He can feel the looming heat of Stan's cock, and he's not afraid, he just wants to savor this moment, but it's Stan who looks sort of worried when Kyle meets his eyes. Kyle kisses him and makes a mental note not to laugh again, because Stan is a sensitive little flower when it comes to certain matters.

"You like that big gentile dick?" Stan asks, smirking, but Kyle doesn't take the cue to laugh. He nods and rubs his thumb through the slit, smearing precome, watching Stan's eyes flutter shut.

"I want to suck you but I don't really know how," Kyle says. Stan groans and humps himself through Kyle's fingers.

"You could practice on me," he says. "I could give you tips."

"Was Wendy good at it?" Kyle asks glumly. He knows he should avoid these sorts of questions, but he's going to wonder so he might as well ask. Stan shakes his head.

"She didn't do it," he says. "I mean, she wouldn't."

"Did she think it was anti-feminist?" Kyle asks, surprised. He's only had his hand on Stan's dick for thirty seconds and he already wants it in his mouth.

"No, she - *un*, Kyle - she, uh, tried it once and got all pissed off because I said 'don't bite me.' I was kidding, but she, *ah*, took it really personally. 'Kay, I'm gonna, I'm gonna come if you keep doing that with your thumb."

"So come," Kyle says, and Stan does, wincing like it hurts him and then going loose-limbed with a groan, his head falling back. Kyle licks his neck while he breathes through it, wants a picture of him like this. Stan looks so content to be conquered by an orgasm, all grown-up and still fragile.

"C'mere," Stan says, though Kyle is already practically on top of him. They roll together under the blankets and kiss sleepily, touching each other's miscellaneous places. Kyle traces the curl of Stan's ear and Stan rubs his thumb over the dip before Kyle's hipbone, making him shiver. The world is soundless except for their kissing, the whisper of the snow and the soft hum of the central heating, which must have kicked back in.

"Did you really take a bus from Boston?" Kyle asks.

"Eleven hours," Stan says. "Then the snow caught up to us when we got to Pennsylvania, and there was an announcement on the intercom that we might not make it if the weather got worse. I prayed so hard." He kisses the bridge of Kyle's nose, looking nervous about this all over again.

"Eleven hours, God - when did you leave California?"

"Wednesday."

"Holy shit, dude!"

"Yeah. It's the week before Thanksgiving, man. The airport was worse than the bus ride. Are you seriously going to stay here all week?"

"I think so. I mean, originally I was just doing it to avoid you. How'd you find out, anyway?"

"Kenny," Stan says. Kyle grins.

"Of course. Did you tell him you were coming here?"

"No. Man, I didn't even know I was coming here until Wednesday afternoon, after I finished my last class. I had a ticket to Denver and everything."

"Wait," Kyle says. "Wait. Your last class lets out on Wednesday afternoon?"

"Not for the whole week. I skipped Thursday and Friday." He shrugs. "I'm a football player, dude. We get away with shit."

"You dick," Kyle says, grinning. He kisses Stan's neck, can't go half a minute without the taste of his skin. "You're all salty," he says. "When was your last shower?"

"Uh, Wednesday morning?"

"Jesus, Stanley. How do you still smell so good?" Kyle moans and pulls him closer.

"Maybe you like it when I'm dirty," Stan says, and Kyle snorts. "So you can be all horrified and feel really clean in comparison."

"Whatever, dude. So, now what are you going to do? There's a blizzard. You're stuck here." Kyle lifts his eyes to Stan's shyly.

"I was gonna stay here anyway," Stan says. "For the week. As long as you let me kiss you."

"You knew I would."

"No, I didn't. Kyle, I haven't heard from you in five months. Jesus, there's so much I have to tell you."

"Like what?" Kyle asks, grinning.

"I don't even know where to start," Stan says. He sits up, and Kyle admires him in the glow from the snowfall. He's glad he didn't put the light on when he let Stan into the room, because this natural light was perfect for their first kiss, pure and soft through the window.

"Are you hungry?" Kyle asks. "I bought a bunch of food yesterday."

"Are those Chips Ahoy?" Stan asks, sounding almost emotional about this when he spots them on Kyle's desk.

They have cookies and Gatorade for breakfast, both of them still naked, crumbs falling onto the sheets. Stan tells Kyle about playing football, the way the size of the crowd sometimes

makes him feel like he's underwater, and how apparently it's not cool to fuck cheerleaders but to go instead for the dance team who performs during the basketball games. There's a coach who dumps cups full of chewing tobacco spittle in the lockers of players who've disappointed him, but Stan hasn't gotten this treatment yet, though he dreads it all the time.

"Do you ever actually make it to class?" Kyle asks. Stan flicks his chin.

"Yes," he says. "I'm taking Hebrew."

"You're shitting me! Say something!"

"I can't, it's too embarrassing! My pronunciation is horrible."

"Dude, you might recall my bar mitzvah. Mine isn't exactly great, either."

Kyle talks about his classes, probably at too great a length, but he's lying on his stomach now, Stan's fingers moving softly over his back while he talks, and he really needs Stan to know every detail about the assholes in his Semantics class, like how this one girl named Emily accused him of developing a New Jersey accent when he got particularly worked up about Barthes.

"Have you made any friends?" Stan asks after Kyle has complained about his classmates for thirty minutes.

"Not really," Kyle says. "I never learned how to make friends without you as my buffer."

"Your buffer?"

"Yeah, like, I was the hysterical, scrawny nerd to your level-headed jock. It was a schtick we had. I liked it. But I guess I have a few friends. I mean, there's Jacob."

"Who's Jacob?"

"My roommate," Kyle says. Stan looks over at Jacob's bed as if he might have appeared there.

"Oh, right," Stan says. "He looks like a slob."

"Dude, your room looks exactly like that."

"Not always. Do you think we could live together?" Stan meets Kyle's eyes when he asks, and Kyle thinks of him on that bus ride, praying so hard.

"You want to live with me?" Kyle says.

"I want to wear your ass as a hat," Stan says, and Kyle laughs. It's a long-standing joke, the first evidence their classmates ever had of their feelings for each other, though Bebe was the one who actually wanted Kyle's ass for a hat at that point.

"Seriously, though," Kyle says, shoving him.

"I am serious," Stan says. "Unless you're going to nag me about making the bed every morning."

"Are we already fighting about whether or not you need to make our bed? The come hasn't even cooled yet, dude."

"It has so," Stan says. "I keep rolling into puddles of it over here. They're ice cold, trust me."

"I was being metaphorical, Stanley."

"Are you going to call me Stanley now that we're fucking?" Stan smiles like he actually kind of likes this. "Is that how it's gonna be?"

"Maybe." Kyle pinches his ass. "So are we fucking or moving in together, or am I still talking about my inability to make friends without you?"

"Both. Or, all three. I haven't really made that many friends, either. So maybe you have something with this theory that we need each other for social interaction."

Kyle smiles and hides his face in the pillow. Stan's fingers are still moving across his back, giving him goosebumps. *We need each other*. Clearly that's true. Kyle was on autopilot before Stan showed up, and he's going to be virtually functionless when he leaves again. But he won't think about that yet.

"I have a hard time believing you haven't made friends," Kyle says.

"People have all these expectations about me," Stan says. "It's like - okay, I'm kind of proud of this metaphor, so don't laugh."

"Kay."

"It's like being in a foreign country, and you look like everyone else there, so when a waitress comes to your table to take your order she's all smiling and shit, asking what you want in the native language, and you have to decide whether you're going to say, "Sorry, English only," or try to vomit out the like, five restaurant-related words you memorized on the plane ride over. Either way, you know her face is going to fall when she hears you speak."

"Is this pronoun significant?" Kyle asks, his heart beating faster.

"Say again?"

"You're saying 'she,' Stan. Is this a girl-related anxiety in specific?"

"Not really," Stan says. "I think I just pictured a waitress. Is that sexist?"

"Probably."

"And, also, I've been thinking, like, the way I grew up? With my parents the way they are? I always wanted to do right by my mom, and if she got upset with me it mattered, but my dad, well. You know my dad."

"I certainly do."

"He's so absurd, and I love him, but I taught myself to ignore him when necessary. I think that's why I was so good at ignoring Cartman when we were kids, and why I don't really give that much of a shit about what guys think of me. Aside from you, 'cause you're, you know." He pauses there, his fingers going still on Kyle's back.

"I'm what?" Kyle asks.

"The one who matters," Stan says.

Kyle turns to smile at him, not sure if he's disappointed or relieved that Stan didn't say, *you're my boyfriend*. There's no way that could be true, not yet, anyway. Maybe not ever, since Stan is a newly famous football personality.

"Oh my God," Kyle says, sitting up fast.

"What?" Stan looks alarmed. Kyle flails for a moment, grinning.

"You know what we haven't talked about yet?"

"No?"

"Dude!" Kyle flails again. "Kenny and Butters! Are porn stars?"

"Oh, shit, I know!" Stan sits up, too, grabbing Kyle's arms. "You fucker, I wanted to freak out about this with you so bad -"

"Me too, holy shit, I can't even -"

"I know, it's like, and their camera girl, have they told you about her?"

"The grad student?"

"Yeah, she, like - okay, well, Kenny met her while selling pot."

"Of course. Wait, where did he get pot?"

"He's Kenny, who knows? But yeah, I was all, trying to get him a job at the campus library, that kind of shit, and he's got to be all macho and act like he's got it covered, so he's out selling pot behind my back and he meets this girl -"

"Is she pretty?"

"Not - really. I mean, she looks like Johnny Depp if he was a five foot tall woman."

"I - wow."

"Yeah. So anyway, she's trying to talk them into setting up this porn site, she's like, it'll be *artful*, it will *respect your love story*."

"Oh, Christ."

"I know. And I'm like, desperately trying to talk him out of it, assuming this perverted female Johnny Depp just wants to see them fuck -"

"Obviously."

"Right? And Kenny's all hesitant, because Butters kind of has this whole history of exploitation already, but Butters is like, really into the idea, like, I think he wanted us to hear them fucking in the shower that morning, dude, he's a little messed up."

"Understandably."

"Sure, sure," Stan says. "Anyway, so they launch this thing, and Kenny is telling me that it's going to further Butters' dream of being a celebrity chef -"

"Yeah, I heard all about that." Kyle rolls his eyes. "I, uh. Actually watched one of the cooking things."

"Me, too," Stan says. "It was surreal."

"To say the least."

"I accidentally saw Butters' ass."

"Same here."

They stare at each other gravely for a moment, then Stan grins and they both start cracking up. Kyle gets tackled, and they're still laughing when they kiss, flushing as they press together, Stan flattening Kyle to the mattress.

"I grilled Kenny on what you thought about this," Stan says.

"Butters' ass?"

"Yeah, Kyle, Butters' ass. I would lie awake at night, burning to know your opinion about it."

"Yours is better." Kyle reaches around to cover it with his hands, the flush on his cheeks deepening.

"Thanks," Stan says. "But seriously, what do you think about this? Kenny is all proud of himself for making money, and Butters is skipping around making cupcakes, but it still makes me a little queasy."

"I know," Kyle says. "It's 'cause Kenny is our egg."

"Our what?"

"Our egg. Remember, fourth grade? The egg we had to keep safe for a week?"

"Oh, yeah." Stan grins. "We were the gay couple."

"The first one in South Park elementary."

"We were revolutionaries, basically."

"Even if it was against our will."

"Totally," Stan says. "It still counts. But, so - what? I don't like the idea of Kenny whoring himself for money because he's my egg?"

"*Our* egg, Stanley. And he's not whoring himself. Well, maybe he is, a little, but he only sleeps with Butters, right?"

"So far as I can tell, yeah."

"So good for them," Kyle says. "I mean, does it disturb me on one level, yes. But they seem happy. Are they happy?"

"I think so," Stan says. "I don't see them that often. I gave them free tickets to a game that I didn't end up playing in, and I wanted to take them out to dinner after, but Kenny was like, 'you can't be seen with us on a game night, we're gay porn stars.' And it made me want to quit the team, 'cause he's right."

"You don't have to quit," Kyle says, because he doesn't want to be Stan's reason. "You just have to be discreet."

Stan shrugs. He's up on his elbows, studying Kyle's face. Kyle braces himself for a serious conversation, which will be difficult with their dicks bumping each other like this, both of them hard again.

"Hey," Stan says. "Kyle?"

"Yeah?"

"I want to suck you but I don't know how."

"Don't tease me."

"I'm not." Stan ducks down to suck on Kyle's earlobe, which feels good enough to make Kyle's hips lift without his permission, his cock pressing more firmly against Stan's. They both groan, and Stan rolls his hips down for more contact.

"You don't have to know how," Kyle says when Stan moves lower, sucking at his neck now. "Just do things with your mouth."

"Biting excluded?"

"Do you really want to bite me?"

"No way, dude," Stan says, kissing Kyle's chest, moving lower. "*You're* my egg."

"Don't say that! The egg is our baby!"

Stan snorts and looks up at him, and Kyle fears he'll come just from having Stan's face so close to his dick.

"Sometimes I worry about you, Kyle," Stan says.

"Don't worry about me. Blow me."

The idea of having Stan's mouth around him is actually pretty intimidating and weird, because for some reason he always pictured it the other way around, but as soon as it's there Kyle is a-okay with this arrangement, grabbing Stan's hair and arching up into that soft, wet heat. If the feeling of Stan's tongue sliding between his lips was overwhelming, this is out-of-body, and Kyle is coming way too fast, Stan swallowing it down.

"Let me do you," Kyle says before he's even regained his breath, Stan crawling up to get a better look at his post-orgasm face. "And I want, ah. To kneel on the floor. Between your legs."

"Won't you be cold?" Stan asks. He's kissing Kyle's face, and Kyle is both curious and petrified to find out what his come tastes like on Stan's tongue. He dares a little lick against just the tip, not sure if he likes it until he tries again, and again, and yeah, he likes it.

"I won't be cold," Kyle says. "I just want to try it, like. On my knees. I guess that's weird." He realizes that this will mean climbing out from under the blankets, letting Stan see him naked, but Stan will be exposed, too.

"I don't think it's weird," Stan says. "It's pretty fucking hot."

"Yeah?" Kyle is thrown by this. He frowns. "Am I hot to you?"

"Kyle. Really?"

"No, I just, I've never thought of myself that way."

"That's part of the reason why you're so fucking hot. To me. Probably to a lot of people."

"Bull-shit. Wait, why?"

"Because you're so innocent about it! You're, like, pouty and defensive and it's so fucking cute, and your shoulders. Look at them."

Kyle looks, confused. "What about them?"

"They're, like -" Stan groans and licks one, then the other. "So perfect. Didn't you ever notice how I couldn't keep my hands off of them? I always had my arm around you, dude, it was like, default. They just *fit*, under my arm, under my hands - and they're so firm and dainty at the same time -"

"Don't call me dainty!"

"See, I love how you're all sensitive about your size," Stan says, still grinding down against him. "I loved that you didn't get big."

"Well! Uh! I'm not small. I'm not Butters."

"I know. You're perfect. It's like Goldilocks. You're just right."

"Can I just suck your dick, please?" Kyle says, not sure if he's annoyed or flattered by this conversation.

"Well, fine," Stan says. "But I'm gonna rub your shoulders the whole time. Or maybe your hair. God, I fucking love your hair." He molests it as he says so, and Kyle grins, because he's waited a long time to hear someone say so, and only Stan's opinion on this really matters. "It looks good like this. All soft and stuff. I miss pulling on your curls, though."

"I loved it when you did that," Kyle says. "I think the first boner I ever had was directly related to you playing with my hair."

"I'm trying to think of the first one I consciously affiliated with you," Stan says. He looks away, squinting. "Oh, wait. We were thirteen, you were spending the night, you moaned."

"I moaned?"

"Yeah, in your sleep. Went right to my dick."

"I was probably having a sex dream about you."

"At thirteen?"

"Fuck yes, Stan. That was like, my nightly sex dreams about Stan stage. You were always pinning me to something and rubbing yourself on me. In my dreams."

"And sometimes in real life," Stan says. He does it now, rolling his hips slow, making Kyle hard again.

"Alright," Kyle says, pushing Stan up by the shoulders. "I need your dick in my mouth, like, now."

"Oh, Jesus Christ," Stan says, scrambling off of him. "Yeah - just - hurry, before I come from thinking about what you just said."

Kyle is too full of nervous anticipation to give much thought to leaving the safety of the blankets, but then the cool air outside the bed hits him and he realizes that Stan can see everything. Soon enough, Kyle can, too, Stan sliding free of the blankets and scooting to the edge of the bed, putting his feet on the floor. They smile at each other sheepishly, neither of them looking crotch-ward yet. Stan puts his hands on Kyle's shoulders and draws him forward gently, until there's really nowhere for him to look but right at Stan's cock. Kyle's mouth gets wet, his heart slamming.

"Ready?" Stan says, like they're about to go over a steep hill together on a sled. His voice is a little pinched. Kyle answers by opening his mouth and taking him in, sucking the tip, sighing at the taste. Stan curses softly, one hand sliding into Kyle's hair.

"Oh," he says when Kyle takes him deeper. "*Fuck*, yeah. *Kyle*. Kyle, oh, Kyle, yeah."

It's not the first time Kyle has been taken aback by the intimate way that Stan pronounces his name, but it's the first time that pronunciation has made him grab his cock and start jerking it. He spreads his legs as he takes Stan in as deeply as he can, holding him at the base. There's no way he's getting even half of this monster in his mouth, but he can feel Stan thickening on his tongue anyway, getting close. When he starts making helpless little noises Kyle knows he should prepare himself to swallow, but he's too busy pumping his own load onto the carpet, shuddering and moaning around Stan's cock. Stan comes with a shout, and Kyle only gets half of it down before he pulls off, coughing, taking a shot in the face.

"Shit, sorry, sorry," Stan says, pulling Kyle up into his lap. "I should have warned you."

"You made it look so easy," Kyle says. He coughs again and wipes at his chin, accepting Stan's shirt when he offers it as a come rag. When his face is clean he reaches around Stan and grabs the Gatorade, chugs.

"Should I be insulted by your eagerness to wash me off your tongue?" Stan asks, but he's grinning.

"I won't lie," Kyle says. "It's not my favorite flavor. Do you always come that much?" He kisses Stan so that he'll know he's not opposed to this, just surprised.

"No," Stan says. "Need I remind you that was my first real blow job ever?"

"What, you didn't get them from the dance team?"

"I didn't trust those bitches not to bite me."

"Seriously, though," Kyle says. He looks down at Stan's collarbone and plays with his hair at the back of his neck, which has gotten long enough to curl upward a little. "Did you. Um."

"No," Stan says. He tips Kyle's chin up so that their eyes are locked. "I'm still a gay sex virgin, and I wasn't about to try girls again. Want to hear what I did instead? It's really gross."

"Um. Okay?"

"I would have gay porn playing on one side of my computer screen, and pictures from our road trip on the other side. The best pictures, I mean, of you."

"Oh, Jesus, I jerked off to pictures of you, too," Kyle says, rolling his eyes. "You scared me there for a second."

"I felt so dirty, though!" Stan says, looking sincerely distressed. "That gay porn was so not worthy of your pictures. I really hated myself for doing this, you've got no idea."

"I've got some idea."

"I'd feel so guilty afterward," Stan says. He pulls Kyle closer and kisses him very tenderly, stroking his back, all of this as if in apology for dirtying the sacred road trip pictures. Kyle accepts it graciously, petting Stan's hair.

"I saved every picture I could find of you," Kyle says, whispering. Only Stan can ever know this. "I'd get all excited when I found one, but I kind of hated them, too, because they were pictures of your life without me. You were this post-South Park stranger."

"Who went home after his games and jerked off to pictures of you," Stan says.

"In lieu of being seen out on the town with gay porn stars."

"In lieu of?" Stan says. "Out on the town? See, I knew you'd turn all Ivy League without me."

"Penn State isn't Ivy League," Kyle says. "It's *Public Ivy*. We all pretend to be proud of that."

"What's Berkeley?" Stan asks.

"Hippie capital of the world," Kyle says. Never mind that Penn State is ranked lower than Berkeley on the USN Report. It's not like Kyle couldn't have gotten *in*, and it's not like Wendy got a full scholarship. Just a partial scholarship. Probably only enough to cover her books. And the USN Report is stupid, anyway. UCLA was ranked higher than Penn State, too.

"You sound like Cartman," Stan says. "Did you hear he followed her to school?"

"Yeah, he told me."

"Don't tell me you two are still in touch."

"Hell no. Sometimes I check his Facebook to see if he's listed Wendy as his girlfriend, though."

"He hasn't," Stan says. "You should hear the way she talks about him. Like, oh, he's so annoying, he's such a cancer on society, he's going to become the supreme dictator of the world if she doesn't stop him. Sometimes I just put the phone down and play video games when she really gets going."

"You think they're still - uh?"

"Oh, yeah. I know Wendy pretty well. I can hear it in her voice. She seems happy, though. I should have let her run after him years ago."

"You don't miss her at all?" Kyle asks. He slides off of Stan's lap and crawls back under the blankets, feeling more exposed by this conversation than his actual nakedness. Stan follows his lead, shrugging.

"I think we'll always be friends," he says. "We've talked a lot about why we were both so desperate to stay together even though we were miserable. Cartman was right, I was this big challenge for her. You know how badly she needs to win. She was this thing that I always thought I could get right if I just worked at it hard enough. I hated my parents for giving up the way they did. You remember."

"Yeah," Kyle says. He squirms against Stan's chest, his tension draining away as Stan's arm curls around him. "I can't believe you've only been here a few hours," he says.

"It's been more like four hours, I think," Stan says.

"What? Seriously? What time is it?"

"About one in the afternoon."

Kyle sits up and looks at the clock in disbelief.

"How are we still in bed?" he says, looking back to Stan.

"Where else would we be?" Stan asks.

"Good point." Kyle drops down into his arms again, snuggling close under the blankets. He pretends like he's trying to sleep, hiding his smile against Stan's chest while Stan strokes his hair, his cheek, his shoulder.

"Goddamn," Stan says, whispering. "I missed you."

"You can't leave," Kyle says. He kisses Stan's neck, afraid to look at him while he says this. "You'd miss me too much. Right?"

"Right." Stan sighs. "You taking a nap?"

"Not really."

"Want to show me around?"

"Um, this is pretty much it," Kyle says. He lifts his head to look at the room. "That side is Jacob's, as we established."

"I meant around campus, dude. Before the snow is up to our chins."

They dress for the cold, and Stan beams when Kyle pulls on his old ushanka. When they leave the room the dorm doesn't feel empty anymore, though by all indication they're the only ones here. They fill the whole building with their voices, laughing as their footsteps echo heavily down the stairwell. Out in the courtyard, the snow is still coming down, though not as heavily as before. Stan walks through it awkwardly, out of practice.

Kyle shows him around, holding his hand because they're the only ones out. They're both wearing gloves, the thick wool making them hold on that much tighter, straining for each other through this barrier. Stan laughs at the names of the quirkier buildings: the Mushroom

Research Center and the Coal Utilization Lab, the Dairy Complex. Predictably, Beaver Stadium makes him laugh the hardest.

"We have to break in there," he says. "I bet I can figure out how. We have this thing, the guys on my team, where we break into stadiums when we're visiting."

"I thought you were done chasing beaver," Kyle says, tugging Stan away from the stadium.

"I'd want to find a football first, anyway," Stan says. His eyes are all lit up like he seriously wants to enact this plan. He laughs when he notices Kyle looking at him warily.

Kyle shows Stan the boring everyday places, not sure what he really wants from this tour. Stan is quiet in the presence of Kyle's dining hall, the liberal arts college where he has most of his classes, and his favorite market, which is still open.

"We should go in and buy something," Kyle says. "The clerk was worried about me yesterday."

"How come?"

"'Cause I was gonna be alone for Thanksgiving."

Stan kisses his cheek and they head for the store, dropping each other's hands before walking inside. Kyle waves to the clerk, wanting to point both fingers at Stan and gloat, Cartman-style: *This boy came here for me, he's mine, he lets me lick him, it's fantastic*. He's blushing as he follows Stan through the store, watching him examine random things.

"I was just thinking about how we need condoms," Stan says, whispering when they pass the store's small selection. "But I guess we don't. It's not like you'll get pregnant, and I had to get a test during my physical. I don't have anything."

"You were worried that you did?" Kyle says. He feels guilty for whispering, like the clerk will think they're telling jokes about him, or plotting to rob the place.

"Sort of," Stan says. "I mean, she cheated on me with Cartman. My trust in her wasn't at an all time high."

"If she'd given you something I would have killed her lying ass so hard," Kyle says, his face heating with rage at the very thought that she might have. "Cartman, too."

"Dude, calm down," Stan says, patting the top of Kyle's ushanka. "We always used something anyway, me and her. I don't think she trusted me either."

"She thought you were fucking another girl?"

Stan snorts. "No, dude. She thought I was fucking you."

"And - what - I'm chock full of STDs or something?" Kyle says, pretending to be offended. He's actually elated that Wendy gave him that much credit, and that she very well may have spent as much time fretting over Kyle as he did over her.

"She had this crazy theory that you and Kenny were fuck buddies," Stan says, examining a jar of baby corn.

"*What*?"

"Shh! I know, it was crazy." Stan is blushing, and Kyle wants to start breaking glass jars. Wendy is no less than diabolical, planting ideas like that in Stan's head. She and Cartman deserve each other.

"*You* never thought that, did you?" Kyle asks, following Stan as he moves toward the frozen foods.

"Heck no," Stan says, his cheeks still burning. "But I would have killed Kenny's lying ass so hard if I did. Just saying."

"Well, it wouldn't have been a lie, exactly," Kyle says, beginning to appreciate the fact that Stan was concerned about this.

"Yeah, it would have."

"How?"

"Because I asked him!"

"You *what*?"

"Kyle, quit shouting. That guy's going to throw us out."

"You asked Kenny if we were fuck buddies? Are you serious? Jesus, I can't believe he didn't tell me!"

"He probably didn't remember. I was drunk, and he was *blasted*."

"Where the hell was I?"

"I don't know, studying? I was always careful not to get drunk about you. Maybe you can guess why. Anyway, he laughed really hard. Kenny. At that idea."

"As well he should have!"

Kyle is silent for the rest of the shopping trip, watching Stan buy Cheesy Poofs and a bottle of champagne, showing a fake California ID at the counter. This annoys Kyle, too, but the clerk barely glances at it and takes Stan's money without hesitation.

"I can't believe you thought I would have Kenny as a fuck buddy," Kyle says as they walk back toward his dorm.

"Don't be mad, dude," Stan says. He puts his arm around Kyle and pulls him close. "I never really thought that, I was just being a drunk shithead when I asked. I wanted Kenny to ask me, you know. If I wanted to be yours."

"Yeah?" Kyle tries to shrug Stan's arm off of him, but it's too heavy. "Is that what you wanted? Is that what we are now, fuck buddies?"

"Kyle." Stan stops walking, and Kyle turns back to him, slowly, afraid to look at him. When he does, Stan is staring at him with such laser beam intensity that it actually scares him, and he wants to laugh the question off.

"What?" Kyle says, mumbling. Stan drops the bag of groceries into the snow and grabs Kyle by the shoulders, staring down into his face.

"I love you," Stan says. "I'm in love with you." He's blushing hard, or maybe it's just the cold wind.

"So?" Kyle says, his voice not as strong as he'd like it to be. "You're going to leave again. There will always be a Fiesta Bowl, Stan."

"Oh, my God," Stan says, closing his eyes.

"What?"

"Nothing, uh. I just pictured this moment a lot of different ways? Over the last five months? And 'there will always be a Fiesta Bowl, Stan' was never your response."

"Well, I love you too, obviously!" Kyle says, getting worked up, not sure if he's angry or about to cry, probably both. "Just - like - I'm gonna have to live without you, right? One way or another?"

"You're so all or nothing!" Stan says, the volume of his voice amplified by the emptiness around them. "It's like - I don't know, Kyle, I don't know. I could bring you the fucking moon and you'd be like, 'thanks, but where the hell are the stars?'"

"Fuck you, I am not like that!"

"Yes, you are, and I love that about you! I love everything about you, and I don't want to leave you, either. Not for the Fiesta Bowl, not for fucking anything, ever."

"So what we are fighting about?" Kyle asks, unwilling to be the one who stops shouting first.

"I don't know!" Stan says, and he deflates, letting go of Kyle. He looks away and holds his arms out as if to appeal to the pity of some imaginary audience. The snow-heavy trees stare back at him indifferently, and he looks back to Kyle, his arms falling to his sides. "What's it going to take for you to accept that I've spent my whole life thinking you're the greatest thing in the fucking universe?"

Kyle could answer that in a lot of ways. He was captain of the debate team, and he's almost enjoying this argument, or he would be if Stan wasn't required in Arizona in three days and in California for the next three and a half years. If they were normal boyfriends having a normal fight in the courtyard of the college that they both attend, Kyle would say that he's got every right to feel insecure after what Stan put him through, all the mixed signals and doubt, and he might point out that it doesn't make sense that Stan could appreciate this demanding aspect of

Kyle's personality when it drove him crazy while he was dating Wendy, could also say that Stan is failing to address the main problem here, which is that he'll have to leave and Kyle will die without him, but Kyle doesn't take up any of these points. He hurries to Stan and kisses him, holding his face, warming his lips with his tongue, sighing into his mouth.

"I'm sorry," Kyle says as Stan's arms slide around him. "I don't mean to be difficult."

"I love it when you're difficult," Stan says, squeezing him. "I love you *'cause* you're difficult. I just want you to know, Kyle, I *need* you to know - that wherever I am, I wish I was with you. That was always true, and it'll always be true. I was hurting, too, all those times we were apart. I was looking at my watch. Wendy was striking me about the head. And who could blame her. I was such a coward, running away from her, avoiding what I really wanted from you. I'm getting braver, though, I think. I really came here thinking you'd slam that door in my face."

"You did not." Kyle kisses Stan's cheeks, hating that he was afraid that might happen, though just this morning he would have delighted at the idea that Stan was capable of worrying about being rejected by him.

"I really did," Stan says. "You don't even know how many sick scenarios I came up with. I thought you might have stayed on campus during the break because of some guy, and that he'd be in there with you, naked, laughing at me -"

"Oh, God! Poor Stan." Kyle pets him, just wants to take care of him now, for as long as he can. "I thought terrible things about you, too. I thought you were going to buy a house for a cheerleader."

Stan snorts. "Is that a euphemism?"

"Sort of. Better get your bag before it gets buried in the snow."

It's only three o'clock, but it's already getting darker as they head back toward Kyle's dorm. When he scans his key card he has a brief fear that some kind of holiday glitch will have locked them out, that the cozy little cave he wants so badly to return to will be barred from them, but the door opens as usual and the heat is still blasting in the building's empty lobby, a sign posted at the front desk that warns students who are staying over the holiday that security will be limited until classes resume.

"Good thing I have my jock boyfriend around," Kyle says, nodding to the sign. He feels dumb for calling Stan his boyfriend, but Stan loves him, is in love with him, so maybe Kyle can call him whatever he wants.

"I can't believe you were going to stay here alone," Stan says. They're taking the stairs slowly, both of them tired after walking around in deep snow all afternoon.

"It's funny, now I don't feel like that was really the plan," Kyle says.

"Some part of you knew I would come for you?"

"I knew *something* was coming. I think I assumed it was my icy death."

"Kyle!" Stan stops on the landing to hug him. "Don't even joke about that. Remember that time we went camping -"

"Yes, Stan," Kyle says, still getting hugged, ready to return to the bed. The stairwell isn't heated and he wants some of that champagne. "Why didn't you kiss me that morning? There were a few seconds when I was sure you were going to."

"I wanted to," Stan says. "But it seemed inappropriate. And I thought you might hate me if I tried it."

"Oh, please. Everyone in South Park knew I loved you. I might as well have taken a billboard out."

"Everyone knew eventually. I was the last one to figure it out."

"When did you know?"

"Um," Stan says. "In Vegas, I think?"

"Not until *Vegas*? Jesus, what did it take to convince you? Me drunkenly holding your hand?"

"Did you -? No, it was in the pool. That was before I was totally trashed, when I was just, you know, the highest point of drunkenness, when everything seems perfect and you could forgive all the faults of the world? You were so, just. Warm, and sweet, and you trusted me so much. And your nipples were like ice picks on my back."

"Shit. I remember being self-conscious about that. So that's how you knew I was into you? My aroused nipples?"

Stan moans and pulls Kyle up the stairs, just one flight left now.

"The nipples were a side-issue," he says. "They made me hard, by the way - well, the whole, you being half-naked and clinging to me thing did, but. Did you notice?"

"No. For a guy with such a big dick you sure hide it easily when it's hard. Tell me every time you got hard for me and I didn't notice. I want a list."

"Uh, maybe later. But, listen, okay - this moment when I knew, or I thought I knew, that you were, you know. Wanting me, too. It was in the pool, it was the way you didn't need anything. You always have to be doing something, Kyle, even when you're drunk, you're either talking your head off or asking what we're gonna do next. That night, I wanted to stay where we were for as long as I could get away with it, and I realized that you did, too. We didn't even need to talk. It was so fucking nice. God, and then you almost died."

"Except not really."

"Well, I was drunk enough to think you might. I barely even remember that whole thing. Like, I blinked and we were in the hospital, and Kenny was shaking me and asking me what

the hell happened. I didn't know what to tell him. I thought it was my fault, with that stupid ice cream, and Kenny thought it was his, with the booze. I'm sure Butters found a way to blame himself, too."

"This will be the first alcohol I've had since then," Kyle says, nodding to the champagne as he unlocks his door.

"Are you kidding me?" Stan says. "I feel like all I do at college is drink."

"That's always a good sign."

"Well, not literally. Fine, if you're going to be so snobby about booze, I'll drink this myself."

"Uh! No! I like champagne! And anyway, we're celebrating."

"Yeah, we are," Stan says. He grins and pulls the champagne from the plastic bag, setting it beside Kyle's bed. He's getting snow everywhere, but Kyle doesn't care too much, though the puddles will irritate him later. They're pulling off their wet clothes, Stan throwing everything into a heap beside his overnight bag, Kyle hanging his things neatly in strategic locations.

"I'm gonna take a shower," Kyle says. "I reek of sex sweat."

"Sex sweat?"

"You know, that sweat smell that gets under the sheets when you beat off? That shit is all up in my coat and stuff."

"Let me smell," Stan says, walking to him. Kyle allows himself to be sniffed, arms at his sides. Stan grins down at him. "I'm coming with you," he says.

"To the shower?"

"Yeah, if that's okay. I want to see the full Kyle Broflovski cleaning regimen. I bet it takes hours." He pokes at Kyle's nipples through his shirt. "And you'll get all soapy."

"God," Kyle says, backing toward the door, pulling Stan with him. "This is - I've thought about this." He swallows and ducks under Stan's arm, remembering that he needs supplies for his shower, like soap. "Let me just get my stuff. You can use some of my flip flops. Your feet are so big, though."

"I'll make it work," Stan says.

It feels weird sneaking a non-resident boy into the shower with him, but there's no one around to see. This bathroom is never clean enough for Kyle's standards and often horrifies him, but it's been scrubbed, post-exodus, and Kyle is hardly thinking about the cleanliness of the tile as he watches Stan undress. They're behind the privacy curtain in one of the stalls, a second curtain separating this area from the shower itself. Kyle has seen Stan naked, but he's yet to be standing in front of him like this while taking it in, naked himself.

"After you," Stan says, drawing the second curtain back. Kyle nods, feeling disoriented as he climbs in first, not sure what he's supposed to do now. Right, turn the water on. He's shivering, and he jumps out of the way to let the water warm up, Stan still hiding behind the curtain.

"Do guys stare at your dick in the locker room?" Kyle asks. Stan snorts. The water begins to steam a bit, and Kyle tests it with his hand.

"They don't stare," Stan says. "I've had comments, though." He walks under the water, and Kyle does, too. They take hold of each other cautiously, like suddenly they're eighth graders at a school dance.

"Comments?" Kyle feels a surge of possessiveness, not liking the idea that anyone thinks they have the right to comment on what belongs to him.

"Yeah, like, they rag on me like I'm bragging just for having it." Stan pulls Kyle closer, until their erections brush together, then their thighs. Stan's are god-like and golden compared to Kyle's, but their skin tones look good together in the shadowy light inside the stall. Stan's is almost olive, tanned darker than Kyle has ever seen it. Kyle's skin is pale, and it's turning pink under the hot water.

"They rag on you?" Kyle says. "How so?"

"They say, like. Is that why you're not fucking your groupies, Marsh? 'Cause they all ran screaming when they saw that thing?"

"You have *groupies*?"

"No! That's just what the guys say."

"Mhm." Kyle doesn't believe that. He wasn't cut out for having a famous boyfriend. He presses himself to Stan, hiding his face against his shoulder and moaning as his skin seems to seal itself to Stan's under the hot water. Stan's hands slide across Kyle's back, and he reaches behind Kyle to get the soap. Kyle just leans against Stan and closes his eyes as Stan rubs the soap worshipfully over his shoulders, his other hand kneading the back of Kyle's neck, soap bubbles slipping down between Kyle's shoulder blades like heavy things that he's shedding.

"Can I wash your hair for you?" Stan asks when the bar of soap is resting against Kyle's left ass cheek.

"Yeah," Kyle says. "That's really, super gay, though."

"You got a problem with me being really, super gay?"

"Nah. Knock yourself out."

Kyle keeps his eyes closed and a dopey smile on his face while Stan massages shampoo into his hair, taking his time, his fingers digging in with a kind of gentle clumsiness, which is the best way to describe Stan in general, now that Kyle thinks about it.

"I think my scalp is my second most erogenous zone," Kyle says. "The first being my dick of course."

"What about your nipples?" Stan asks, sounding sad on their behalf.

"Oh, yeah, I forgot about them. So what's up with you being obsessed with them? Not that I don't like it. Is this some kind of transitional thing, like they remind you of when you were with girls?"

"Girl, singular," Stan says. He pulls Kyle under the water and tips his head back to rinse the suds from his hair. "And I think I like yours because I didn't like hers."

"You didn't?"

"No, they were, like - girl nipples? Which are bigger? Yours are all tiny and cute, and - c'mere."

He turns Kyle around and ducks down to lick his nipples in demonstration, making Kyle wish they were back in bed, where he could recline while watching this. He uses the opportunity to put some shampoo in Stan's hair, its usual silkiness bordering on greasiness as Kyle works the shampoo in with his fingers. It's a good feeling, getting Stan clean again, though they'll be more sex sweat under the sheets soon. Stan stands up to rinse his hair and Kyle admires him, hard as hell but not especially anxious to get off, three orgasms into the day.

"This is what it would be like if we lived together," Kyle says, maybe stupidly. Stan rubs the water from his eyes and blinks at him.

"My shower's nicer," he says. "You should see the athlete dorms. It's sick, dude."

"I bet it is," Kyle says, thinking of all those massive meatheads in the same house. "Is it shared? The shower area?"

"Only in the locker room. We all have our own rooms, our own bathrooms, and I've got this little kitchen thing that I never use. You could move in there and no one would know."

"Oh, *right*." This dampens Kyle's arousal considerably. He gets the soap and washes in the places that Stan missed or didn't clean thoroughly enough. "I'm sure the gay sex would fly right under everybody's radar."

Stan lets the subject drop, and Kyle isn't sure if he's glad for this or annoyed. He keeps floundering between wanting to talk about it - Stan will return to that world, Kyle will stay snowed into this one - and wanting to pretend that neither of them are thinking about it. He tries to avoid Stan's eyes, but Stan pulls him close, and it would be more incriminating not to look up at him. Kyle does, laying his hands on Stan's chest.

"Are you ready to get out?" Kyle asks, pretending to be fine. He wants to be fine; he needs these five days, these six nights. Surely Stan will leave first thing on the morning after Thanksgiving. He might even have to leave on Thanksgiving night, if the airport runways are clear enough. They'll be wanting him for practice before the big game.

"Just let me look at you for a second," Stan says. He puts his hands on Kyle's shoulders and takes a deep breath. There's a combination of admiration and seriousness in his expression that makes Kyle afraid he might be about to propose marriage, or suggest that they should run away from their lives together.

"Kyle," Stan says. The pause is worrying. Kyle braces himself.

"Yes?"

"Everything's such bullshit without you. It's like I'm in a movie and I have to keep acting like it's all real or I'll lose my part. But it's a boring ass movie and I never get a break."

Kyle doesn't know what to say. He can't encourage Stan to quit playing football; it's obvious that he loves it when he talks about it, even if he loves Kyle more. Kyle remembers what it was like to watch him play. He never had any interest in football until he realized how good Stan was, and noticed the way grown men would suck in their breath and hold it while they watched him run, the way his throws arced like fine art, the whole world on pause until the ball was caught. Kyle has only experienced it from the stands, hasn't played football since he was eight, but he's tried to imagine what it must be like for Stan: breathing hard inside that helmet, being able to hold a strategy in his head while he reacts to the chaos around him, no time to rethink things after that first leap into action, just moving as fast as he can, and then the sudden knowing that he should throw, the other, bigger guys knocking him to the ground as soon as the ball is gone, all of them listening for the crowd's reaction. Kyle has never wanted Stan to lose himself to this, because he's so much more than what he can do on a football field, but he doesn't want Stan to turn his back on it, either.

"You know what I haven't seen yet?" Kyle asks.

"What?"

"The pictures from the road trip."

He's pretty sure it's the wrong thing to say, that Stan wants to talk, or to hear something equally heartbroken from Kyle, about how he doesn't even feel like he's in a movie when he's not with Stan, how he just feels hollow and strange to himself, like a person he doesn't really know yet. Stan's eyes sink at little at the corners, but he smiles.

"I brought my camera," he says. "They're still loaded on there. I got some pretty good ones."

They get out of the shower and go back to Kyle's room still dripping, adding more water to the already soggy carpet that stretches from Kyle's bed to Jacob's. When they're dry they put on fresh underwear and climb under the blankets, Kyle's cock still a little on the heavy side but not in dire need of attention. They prop up pillows against the bed's short headboard, and Kyle slides under Stan's arm, pulling his laptop over so that Stan can plug his camera into it. They both laugh at the first picture, which is of Cartman's giant piles of food.

"I forgot you took that," Kyle says.

"It had to be documented."

Their concerns about the future are put on hold as they look at the pictures, laughing hard at most of them: sparrows eating french fries right out of Kenny's hand, Cartman flicking off the WELCOME TO UTAH sign, Kyle glowering up at the camera after having just woken up, his head on Stan's leg. Kyle's chest fills with embarrassed contentment as they flip through the pictures, because there are more of him than anything else: Kyle sleeping, sitting in a booth at Denny's, laughing at something Kenny said, eating ice cream in his boxer shorts, and plenty of him just smiling for the camera, for Stan.

"I feel like I look five years older than I did in these pictures," Kyle says.

"You don't, dude. You were just more tan. And curlier."

"There aren't enough of you," Kyle says as Stan scrolls past scenic shots taken from the car window. "I should have taken more of you."

"You could take some now," Stan says, faking a pose. "Just don't let them end up on Deadspin."

"Ha." Now Kyle is back to thinking about the football thing, the future. He wants to stay in the past for a little longer, especially now that he knows how this particular story ended. He lost Stan, or tried to throw him away, but he got him back, and he's so warm against Kyle under the blankets that he's already sweating again, just a little.

Kyle's phone rings, and he wants to ignore it, but it might be his mother and she knows perfectly well that he's not in class or studying at the library, his usual excuses for blowing off her calls not viable. He picks up his phone and laughs when he sees that it's not his mother calling.

"Hey, Kenny," he says, looking to Stan, who smiles.

"Did you get my email?" Kenny asks.

"Yeah, I got it. Sorry, I -"

"So when are you flying out? Tonight? Tomorrow? Let's make this happen, Kyle. I'm not letting you stay there alone. It's not an option."

"I'm not alone," Kyle says. He settles under Stan's arm again, scooting against him.

"Oh," Kenny says. "Did you end up going home?"

"No, I'm in my dorm."

"Okay." Kenny sounds alarmed. Kyle is enjoying it, tracing his finger around Stan's belly button with his free hand. "Who's with you?" Kenny asks.

"A big, naked guy who's been in bed with me all day," Kyle says.

"Hilarious, Kyle. Seriously, though, I -" He hears Stan laughing and pauses. "Wait, who - what -"

"Hi, Kenny," Stan says, pulling the phone over to speak into it. Kyle cracks up, and holds the phone between him and Stan so they can both hear Kenny's reaction. He's silent for awhile, though Kyle can hear his huffing disbelief.

"Was the naked part serious?" Of course this is Kenny's first concern. "Is the pointless torture over? Did you guys finally fuck?"

"We're doing it right now," Stan says. "Nice timing, Kenny."

"Way to ruin the moment," Kyle says, beaming at Stan. He loves this, sharing a phone call, being discovered together, having an inside joke that involves being naked with Stan.

Kenny sputters for awhile, then laughs. Kyle can hear him calling Butters over to the phone.

"They did it!" Kenny shouts. "Stan and Kyle! It's happened! Oh, Christ, Jesus Lord, it's a Thanksgiving miracle. I'm putting you on speaker."

"Hey, guys!" Butters says. He sounds elated to be alive, as usual, but it doesn't seem forced like it did in South Park. "Congratulations!"

"You need to send us pictures," Kenny says. "I've been banging my head against a wall over this since grade school. I require proof."

"Alright," Stan says. "Hang on a sec."

He holds the phone back far enough to capture his face and Kyle's, together on the propped up pillows. Kyle pulls the blankets up higher and rests his head on Stan's shoulder, smiling. Stan sends the picture to Kenny, and after a few seconds Butters squeals, or maybe, actually, that was Kenny.

"Jesus, you guys look happy." Kenny sounds like he'll cry. "Okay, I've got it. Come here for Thanksgiving. Butters is going to make this amazing rosemary turkey thing, we're doing a whole Thanksgiving special on our site, it's gonna be great -"

"Sorry, there's a blizzard," Kyle says, not wanting these days with Stan overwhelmed by Kenny and Butters and their whole new world. "But thanks for the invite."

"Oh, fine. You guys should be alone for awhile, anyway, I guess. Jesus, Kyle, can you admit that I was right now? That you should have stopped ignoring him months ago?"

"Yeah, Kyle," Stan says.

"I don't know," Kyle says. "This has been pretty -" He looks at Stan. "Perfect. Just how - he showed up and -" He drops the phone down so that Kenny won't hear him kiss Stan. Kenny is shouting something, probably asking for another picture.

"Fine, don't admit it, but I was right," Kenny says when Kyle brings the phone back up. "Goddamn, I don't even know how to live in a world where you two are actually honest with each other. What will I worry about?"

"Global warming," Stan suggests. "Or, you know, not letting this porn situation get out of hand."

"Porn situation? Really, Stan? It's a cultural revolution. Tell 'em, Butters."

"Oh, it's been a lot of fun," Butters says. "And we bought a car!"

"A 1970 Cadillac Deville, mint," Kenny says.

"How much did that cost?" Stan asks.

"Don't worry your pretty little head over it," Kenny says. "Everything is well in hand, really. We're thinking of putting up a personal message to our parents on the site, now that we're getting kind of famous."

"What would the message say?" Kyle asks, exchanging a wary look with Stan.

"'Go fuck yourselves.' All caps, huge font, black letters flashing on a white background. What do you think?"

"Um," Stan says.

"As your surrogate parents, that hurts us," Kyle says.

"Oh, you know that's not directed at you guys. God, what am I going to do with myself? Mom and Dad are back together! It's every kid's dream!"

"This is getting creepy," Stan says.

"Says the guy who told me he was in the middle of sex when I called."

"Are you two gonna be okay in that blizzard?" Butters asks. Kyle had almost forgotten he was there. The whole idea of Kenny and Butters living together as boyfriends in sunny California is almost as hard to grasp as the fact that they're an internet porn sensation.

"We'll be okay," Kyle says. "We're from Colorado, dude. We can handle blizzards."

"You'd be surprised how fast you get used to being warm all the time," Kenny says.

"Yeah," Kyle says. He reaches under the blankets to put his hand on Stan's thigh. He's already used to it, can't imagine going days, weeks, months without this.

"Well, I'll let you two get back to business," Kenny says. "Call me tomorrow and tell me how it went."

"Right," Kyle says. "That will totally happen."

"Tomorrow, hell, we'll call you immediately afterward," Stan says.

"We'll do a teleconference," Kenny says.

There's a silence then, and Kyle gets the feeling Butters has wandered off, because if he were still present he would make some helpful comment about the weather or his turkey recipe, just to be polite. There's no need for politeness between the three of them, even when they're speaking to each other from opposite sides of the country. Kyle can feel Kenny smiling, warm afternoon sunlight spilling in from the window of his studio apartment, Butters humming from the kitchen, Stan and Kyle sheltered together against the storm. Kenny is happy. Kyle can feel it, and he knows Stan can, too.

"Well," Kenny says. "You should at least think about coming out here for New Year's Eve. We're gonna have a great party."

"Yeah, you should," Stan says to Kyle. "I could show you my, like. Life."

"Okay," Kyle says. The idea of little touristic glimpses of Stan's life is so depressing, their romance reduced to visits that begin and end at airport baggage claims.

"Alright, I'll let you go," Kenny says, and suddenly Kyle feels like he was Kenny's egg all along.

They say their goodbyes and hang up, the sky outside beginning to darken properly now, snowflakes fattening up as the temperature drops. Kyle rolls against Stan and they kiss for awhile, the blankets pulled up to their chins, their legs sliding together.

"You think they're gonna be okay?" Kyle asks.

"Butters and Kenny?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know, man, but I bet Kenny asked Butters the same thing about us as soon as he hung up."

"You think?" Kyle sits up and grabs the champagne, twisting off the little cage around the cork.

"Yeah, I'm pretty positive." Stan rubs his fingers over Kyle's back. "You and Kenny are funny. You're so worried about each other all the time."

"We are not. Or - you are, too. About Kenny, you've been worried about this porn thing."

"Yeah, I worry about him, but not about his love life."

"Are you accusing me of being over-invested?" Kyle can't tell if Stan is jealous or charmed.

"No," Stan sits up and kisses Kyle's cheek. "I think it's sweet. You know how to open that?"

"Yes." Kyle doesn't actually. He tugs at it, grunting, and elbows Stan when he snickers.

"Let me," Stan says, taking the bottle from him. "See, you've got to angle it, preferably away from windows, and then use a towel - a blanket, in this case - and you turn, see?"

Kyle jumps when it pops. Stan smirks and blows smoke from the tip of the bottle. They drink it in bed, out of mismatched cups, watching crap on TV. The glow from the screen starts to feel like a fire they're warming themselves by as the darkness thickens outside, and Kyle begins to feel a little drunk after his second plastic cup full of champagne. At six o'clock, they watch a report about the blizzard on the news. From beneath the blankets, pressed against Stan, the storm seems like harmless entertainment, a dragon that they've already slain.

“Are you hungry?” Kyle asks as Stan pours him a third cup of champagne.

“Yeah,” Stan says. He settles against the pillows again, drawing Kyle to him. They sip from their cups and watch a commercial for sub sandwiches.

“Do you want to fuck me?” Kyle asks. He's not sure why the question seemed to follow, but now that he's asked it he's scared, clutching at Stan, his face hidden against Stan's neck.

“I – are you – you want me to?” Stan says. He looks down at Kyle, and it should be a comfort to realize that Stan is scared, too, but Kyle doesn't want him to hesitate. “I mean,” Stan says. “Are you, like. Ready for that?”

“Yeah,” Kyle says. He's not scared about having Stan inside him, just about the process of getting him in there. It's going to hurt, and neither of them really knows what they're doing. He watches Stan's pulse pound for a few beats, then looks up to meet his eyes again. There's less fear in them now, more interest.

“We should eat dinner first,” Stan says. Kyle laughs, and Stan smiles queasily, pulling Kyle on top of him. “Your stomach's growling,” he says. He covers Kyle's ass with his hands, and Kyle stiffens, thinking about how intimate those parts of their bodies are going to have to get before Stan's dick can fit inside him. He sits up, straddling Stan's hips, showing him his tented boxers.

“Do you want Easy Mac or instant noodles?” Kyle asks. Stan just stares up at him for awhile, like this is a very serious question, or like he's still thinking about the last one Kyle asked.

“I want a picture of you,” Stan says. “Like this. Just like this.”

“Don't,” Kyle says, covering himself. “Don't make me think about – you know.”

“About what?”

“How you'll have to look at pictures of me when you're gone.”

He climbs off of Stan and goes to wash his hands in the little sink on his side of the room. Stan watches him, his head tipped back over the pillows. He looks cute, confused and a little drunk, and Kyle wants a picture of him, too. He gets Stan's camera and takes one.

“Sorry,” Kyle says.

“For what? You can take my picture, I don't care.”

“No, I mean – for bringing it up. Let's just not think about it.”

“What, the Fiesta Bowl?”

“Yeah,” Kyle says, because that thing has come to represent any and all future separations from Stan. “So? Mac and cheese or noodles?”

“Mac and cheese is noodles.”

“Okay, smart ass, you want me to pick for you?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Are you getting off on me making you dinner?” Kyle asks, going for the noodle boxes.

“Maybe.” Stan lifts the camera and Kyle flicks him off. “It's only because everything you do gets me off,” he says, taking the picture once Kyle's back is turned. “I get off on the way you tie your shoes. Man, you should have heard me at that camp this summer, I couldn't shut my stupid mouth, everything was 'my friend Kyle does this thing,' and, 'this one time, my friend Kyle,' and, 'my friend Kyle says.'”

“Oh, Jesus,” Kyle says. He turns from the microwave, beaming. “Did they accuse you of being in love with me?”

“Of course. And my nickname was 'My Friend Kyle.' They wrote it on my locker. Then, when it had been like a month and you still wouldn't talk to me, I made this, like, resolution to stop talking about you, and they'd all ask me how my friend Kyle was doing lately. I'd laugh or whatever, but goddamn, that question was, like. Getting stabbed. 'Cause I didn't know. Or I did, but only through vague reports from Kenny.”

“You understand, though, right?” Kyle says. The microwave is heating their noodles, and he's standing beside it in his boxer shorts, not sure if he feels guilty or vindicated. “I mean, you get why I couldn't talk to you.”

“I guess,” Stan says. “Kenny said you needed time. He said *we* needed time, both of us. I was like, time? I need *Kyle*. And Kenny would try to get me to admit why, and I'd tell him to fuck off, and then he wouldn't talk to me, either, but he'd break down after a week or so.”

“We were both stubborn,” Kyle says. He'd imagined they would need to discuss this at length when and if they talked again, but now it seems irrelevant.

“I'm getting kind of drunk,” Stan says, pouring himself more champagne. “I guess 'cause I haven't eaten much.”

“Here,” Kyle says. He serves Stan his noodles, the plastic bowl wrapped in paper towels so it won't burn his hands. Stan sits up to take it from him, and Kyle kisses his forehead before going back to the microwave for his own bowl.

“Kyle?” Stan says.

“Yeah?” He's stirring his noodle bowl with chopsticks, hoping that Stan will be impressed that he's learned how to eat noodles authentically.

“I want you to transfer to UCLA,” Stan says. His voice is pinched, afraid. “No, I. Need you to. I know it's a lot to ask –”

“Please, can we not do this?” Kyle says, keeping his back to Stan. “It's just gonna make it harder. They wouldn't let me transfer in the middle of the year, and even if they did, I can't afford the tuition, I couldn't even afford a plane ticket right now –”

“We could drive.” Stan sounds desperate, and he looks so lost when Kyle turns to him, the bowl of noodles cupped in his hands. “And I'd pay for everything. Your tuition. I could afford it, Kyle, they give me money all the time, it's sick –”

“That's insane,” Kyle says. “That's your money, that's your future, you've got no guarantee that it's going to keep coming in like this, you could be hurt or just –”

“You're my future,” Stan says. “And I can't – I can't have this and walk away from it. I can't go back without you, I won't.”

“Eat something,” Kyle says, shaking his head. “You're drunk, like you said.”

“So? I've been thinking about this all day. Goddammit, Kyle, I knew you'd say no.”

“Yeah? That's probably why you actually offered. I'm not letting you pay for my college, Stan. Christ. It's too much.”

They eat their noodles in angry silence, staring at the TV. Kyle can't pay attention to it, and he knows Stan isn't really watching, either. Stan is an idiot if he thinks Kyle could actually accept what he's offering. That money would disappear so fast, and Kyle would have to live up to what Stan had paid for. He would have to hide while he was doing it, too, or risk scaring away the source of any future money.

“Guess what?” Stan says when he's finished the noodles, setting them on the shelf that runs along the side of Kyle's bed.

“What?” Kyle asks, annoyed by his tone.

“I'm not gonna fuck you unless you agree to at least think about coming to California.”

Kyle rolls his eyes. “What are you, five? I'm not doing it, Stan. I want to be with you, but that's too high a price, it would create so much tension –”

“Why? Why would it create tension? You're my family, Kyle, and the only reason you couldn't get a loan and come out there with me in the first place is because you bailed my parents out of debt.”

“Don't you think paying for my tuition might throw up a few red flags with the administration?” Kyle says. “And we couldn't live together, not without people getting suspicious. You – you'd have to get a fake girlfriend. God, I'd hate you for it–”

“What are you talking about?” Stan asks, frowning. “Why would I need a fake girlfriend?”

“You're only a freshman and you're already getting all this attention! It's only going to get worse, and no one is going to want you to be gay, least of all you, not publicly.”

“You don't know that,” Stan says, but his face is coloring, his shoulders slumped.

“Let's just call this what it is, since you're bound and fucking determined to ruin the mood by talking about it,” Kyle says. “It's an interlude. A little gay interlude that no one on the west coast will find out about. When it's over, you can go back and be superman again, and you won't even have to feel bad about it, because you *offered* to pay my tuition, knowing I wouldn't let you.”

“Fine.” Stan gets out of the bed. “Offer rescinded.”

“Good! What are you doing?”

“Getting dressed.”

“Why?” Kyle's heart starts slamming, and he wants to choke his self of three seconds ago for saying what he said, though he knows it's true, and that it's going to hurt so bad when Stan goes back to being normal and beloved.

“I don't know,” Stan says. “I think I'm going for a walk.”

“No, you're not! Stan, stop. It's dangerous out there, you don't even know your way around.”

“It's fine,” Stan says. “I grew up in Colorado, remember? I can handle some fucking snow.”

“Stan, no! Please, I'm sorry, I was being an asshole, but you can't –”

“I would quit football for you!” Stan shouts, throwing his boot down before he can get it on his foot. “I would, if you asked, and you don't even care, everything I do is so unimpressive – see, I *knew* this shit would happen, this is why I never made a move on you.”

“Because you'd have to give up football?” Kyle says, starting to cry.

“No! Because I knew I'd fuck it up!”

“You haven't fucked anything up – stop, you can't go outside!”

“I need some air,” Stan says, sitting down to tie his boots.

“I don't know what you want me to say,” Kyle says. His voice is trembling but not quite wrecked. “I keep trying not to think about it, but it's all I can think about, how you're going to leave, how I can't come with you –”

“I just told you, you can come with me!” Stan gets up and throws his arms out. “Why don't you just admit to me that you don't even want to?”

“*What*? Of course I do, but I can't just –”

“If you wanted to, you'd do it,” Stan says, grabbing his coat. “It's not that complicated.”

“It is complicated! How can you not see that? It's complicated by the money, by football, by – by –”

“By you, Kyle! You're complicating it. Trust me, I'd know. I spent all those years doing the same fucking thing, exactly what you're doing now, because I was scared. There was always some reason why I couldn't just *be with you*. I wasted all that time when we lived two minutes away from each other, and maybe we did need to be apart, maybe we did need fucking *time*, but I've had time, and I know what I want now.” Stan is at the door, zipped into his coat, and Kyle should run after him, but he can't move.

“What do you want?” Kyle asks. He feels so small and defenseless, wearing only his boxers while Stan is dressed in two layers of armor.

“I told you what I want,” Stan says. “If it comes down to you or football, I pick you. If it comes down to you or the money, I pick you. Fuck, if I could get into this school, I'd transfer here. If that's what you want, I'll do it. So figure out what the fuck you want, alright?”

Before Kyle can even get his mouth working, Stan has walked out of the room and slammed the door behind him. Kyle listens to his footsteps moving down the hall, then down the stairwell. He feels like the world is rewinding, like what happened this morning is being erased. He wipes his eyes clear and grabs the champagne, drinking from the bottle. Stan is wrong; he's not inventing problems, he's not just scared. The fact that they would have to hide what they were to each other if Kyle moved to California is reality, and it would be hard, painful, dangerous. Kyle can't move out there, anyway, can't take Stan's money and answer to an irate Randy Marsh when it's gone. Then there's Kyle's parents, who would be humiliated if they found out Stan was paying for Kyle's education because they couldn't. He could ask Stan to transfer here, but that would be the end of his football career, and Stan would end up hating Kyle for it somewhere down the line. Kyle would hate himself, in any of these scenarios, but he hates himself most for letting Stan walk out of the room.

Kyle finishes the champagne and watches the clock, waiting for Stan to return. It's dark outside, and the muted television is showing a weather report that says a second wave of snow is coming tonight, that residents might wake up to another ten inches. Kyle falls asleep, pulled under by the weight of the alcohol, and has terrible nightmares about Stan getting lost in the snow, buried under an avalanche, gone forever. He wakes up thinking the bed is collapsing, and he gasps, flails, going still when Stan puts a hand against his back and whispers *shhh*.

"It's okay," he says, still whispering. "It's just me." His hand is cold; he smells like snow and pine needles. Kyle rolls onto his back and rubs his eyes, disoriented enough to think that they're back in high school, that Stan is returning from a date with Wendy. Stan climbs under the blankets like he always did back then, but this time he pulls Kyle to him, into his arms. They kiss, and Kyle lets himself stay in the past for a few seconds longer, pretending this is the night that Stan finally wanted more from him and took it, without words, without hesitation. He's wearing a t-shirt and his boxer shorts, and he lets Kyle push the shirt off, squirming out of the boxers before sliding Kyle's down, too. They sigh into each other's mouths when they're pressed together, ankle to shoulder, wearing nothing.

"I'm sorry," Kyle whispers, looking up at Stan when he pauses to touch Kyle's face, his hair. The room is dark, and Stan must have turned the television off. Kyle's eyes adjust in the moonlight through the window, and he takes stock of Stan, still shaken from his nightmares as his hands find their way across Stan's back, down to his legs, back up to his shoulders. He's shivering a little. It must have been so cold out there.

"Don't be sorry," Stan says. "It's a lot to lay on you."

"I don't want to lose you," Kyle says, the words bringing the threat of tears back into his voice. Stan shakes his head.

"You can't lose me," he says. "I'm yours. Whatever you decide, no matter what, always."

Kyle kisses him, wrapping his legs around Stan's waist, his arms around Stan's back. There's nothing Stan can say that will make Kyle confident enough to believe that he'll be able to keep him, that something bigger and stronger and better won't take him away. But there is one thing, maybe, that he can do.

"Please," Kyle says, shifting so that his ass rubs against Stan's cock, which is quickly growing hard. "I need it, please, I want you inside me."

Stan stares down at him, looking so sad for a moment that Kyle thinks he'll deny him this, but then Stan kisses him, his breath shuddering from him, and when he takes hold of Kyle's shoulders Kyle knows that he'll get what he asked for.

"I've wanted this," Stan says, whispering into Kyle's ear, "So much. So much, Kyle. God, I hated myself for it. I thought that – even if, even if you wanted me to kiss you, you wouldn't want *this*."

"Why?" Kyle strokes his hair.

"I don't know." Stan rubs his hands down over Kyle's chest, then up again, thumbing his nipples gently. "Because nothing I could do to you would do it justice."

"It?"

"How much I want to know what it's like," Stan says. He leans down, lowering his face to Kyle's, nudging Kyle's nose with his. "To be in you. To have that from you, to – to have you let me in."

Kyle groans and kisses him, rubbing his cock against Stan's stomach at the thought of letting him in, little by little, getting *opened*. He's seen porn and has read gay sex guides, has poked around down there a few times himself, but nothing could prepare him for how much he wants it now, his whole body begging to be stripped of its innocence by Stan.

They use Kyle's Cetaphil lotion for lube, the same bottle that Kyle used last night when he jerked himself off to Stan's pictures. That seems so long ago already, and so impossibly small, Kyle's fantasies such a poor approximation of what it really feels like to have Stan all

around him, parting Kyle's legs with one hand under the blankets, feeling him with a slick finger.

"You're tight," Stan whispers when he starts to push inside. Kyle nods, sweating, trying to stay relaxed. It helps that this feels like a waking dream, the snow falling like soft music past the window. He's read that you're supposed to bear down, so he does, and Stan's finger slides in deeply, both of them groaning.

"Goddamn," Kyle says. He can't believe this is finally happening, and can't imagine a world where he doesn't have this, how he ever lived without trusting Stan this much.

"Is it okay?" Stan asks, kissing Kyle's cheeks. Kyle nods.

"Feels good," he says, heat spreading across his face. "How - *uh*. Do you like it?"

"Yeah." Stan lets out a choppy breath. He pulls his finger almost all the way out and pushes it in again, slow. Kyle's eyes flutter shut, and when his head tips back Stan bends down to lick his neck. "You're so fucking hot," he says. Kyle laughs, squeezing around Stan's finger when he does.

"Like, temperature-wise, or -?"

"Both," Stan says. "It's so – warm, Kyle, God, so tight."

"*Ngh*. Yeah. Keep doing that. Feels good."

They roll onto their sides, Kyle's leg hooked around Stan to allow him access to his ass, Stan's other arm snug around Kyle's shoulders. Kyle thought this part would be the most embarrassing of all, but he feels so safe, kissing Stan while his finger sinks in and pulls out, pressing back for more and whining happily when he gets it.

"Kyle," Stan says, breathing Kyle's name into his mouth.

"Hmm?"

"You – ah. I don't know. I can't believe it's you. It's finally you."

Kyle wraps his hand around his cock and Stan's, jerking them together, matching the pace of Stan's finger. Stan picks up on this, and when Kyle moves his hand faster, Stan does the same with his finger.

"I want your dick," Kyle says, biting at Stan's lip. Stan moans.

"Nuh-uh. Not yet. Shit, you're so little. So tight. Don't want to hurt you."

"It won't hurt," Kyle says, though he's pretty sure it will, at first. "Just – just think about how good that's gonna feel around your cock."

"I am thinking about it," Stan says, groaning. "Trying not to come."

"You can't come yet." Kyle is playing with Stan's lip, rolling his hips back as Stan's finger pushes into him faster, deeper, but not deep enough. "Not until you're in me."

"You've thought about it?" They're so close, so connected, and Kyle can hear it when Stan swallows. "About my come in you?"

"In me, on me, dripping out of me when I'm all used up–"

"*Fuck*, Kyle, Jesus."

Stan removes his finger slowly, and Kyle flexes when it's gone, feeling the stretch, the way he stays open even without Stan's finger, just a little. He rolls onto his back and watches Stan pour lotion into his palm.

"Are you sure you're ready?" Stan asks as he slicks himself.

No. "Yes," Kyle says. There's only one way to find out. Kyle takes hold of the backs of his knees and pulls himself open, lifting his legs the way he does when he needs to come, just like all those times when he's been deeply afraid that someone might see him like this, spread and defenseless. Stan curses under his breath and rubs his hands over Kyle's legs.

"Should I put a pillow under you?" Stan asks. "I've heard, um, I mean. I've read that it helps."

"Okay," Kyle says, allowing this mostly to make Stan feel better. Tilted at this angle, Kyle is even more vulnerable, more obviously available, open to what's about to happen to him. He takes a deep breath and lets it out, staring up at Stan.

"Tell me to stop if it hurts," Stan says. He's stroking himself sort of anxiously, as if he's taking in the dimensions of his cock and wondering how this is going to work.

"Just go slow," Kyle says. He's beginning to feel awake enough to worry, but his cock is dribbling onto his stomach and he wants this, needs it. "Really slow."

Stan rearranges the blankets over them before lining himself up, and Kyle is glad for the shelter, though his skin is sweltering already. He grows exponentially hotter when he feels Stan's cockhead bumping against him, timid and too big, way too big. Kyle takes two handfuls of the blankets and tries to keep breathing normally.

"Hey," Stan says, not missing Kyle's panic. He leans down to kiss him, stroking his face with his thumb. "Want me to stretch you more?"

"Yes," Kyle says, feigning annoyance. "With your dick. Come on, please. I'm ready, just. Do it."

It's a long, slow burn, and Kyle feels every inch of it, Stan's cock reforming his body as it pushes into him, making him acutely aware of his previously untouched places, his nerves screaming with agony one second and interest the next, everything inside him tumbling over like dominoes. Stan is touching his cock, stroking his belly, but Kyle can barely register either sensation, all of his thought processes concentrated on taking Stan in, sweat rolling down his sides now.

"I'm about halfway in," Stan says, watching him. Kyle laughs deliriously and touches Stan's chest with shaking hands.

"Half?" he says in disbelief.

"Want me to stop? Or we could –"

"No, God, we've come this far. Keep – keep going."

Kyle isn't sure how long it takes to get Stan all the way inside him, but when he's fully seated they both let out long breaths of relief, Kyle's body throbbing around the intrusion as Stan drops down to kiss him. He wraps his legs around Stan's back, gasping at the feeling of moving while Stan is in him, *so deep*. They kiss for a long time, and Kyle can't decide which of them is shaking harder.

"Are you okay?" Stan asks, whispering the words against Kyle's bottom lip. Kyle nods slowly, and it's true, he's okay.

"So full," he says, and Stan groans.

"Jesus, you feel like heaven," he says.

"My name's Kyle, but thanks."

Stan grins. "Don't make me laugh," he says.

"Why not?"

"'Cause I'm gonna come as soon as I move, and laughing might do it."

They kiss again, softly now, both of them trying to keep still. Kyle has his hands on Stan's waist, holding him loosely, his fingers moving through the fine layer of sweat that's coating Stan's skin.

"Was it like this with her?" Kyle asks, because he can't stop wondering, even if now is not the time. Stan shakes his head, dropping down to lick some sweat from Kyle's jaw.

"No," he says. "It wasn't like this."

"What's different? Other than the obvious."

"I didn't love her like I love you," Stan says, lifting up to meet Kyle's eyes.

"Which is how?" Kyle says. He gives Stan a little squeeze, watching his eyes change with the pressure.

"More than anything," Stan says. "Most of all."

With Stan inside him, all around him, as close as he'll ever get, Kyle believes this is true. He knows it's true for him, that he'll never measure anything he cares about on the same scale he

uses for his feelings for Stan. He moves his hips in a tiny twitch, and Stan groans.

"You can move, too," Kyle says.

"I don't want it to be over," Stan says, sounding like he'll cry.

"We could do it again," Kyle says, because he wants to learn how to take it hard, to try everything.

"Yeah, but." Stan kisses him, and Kyle notices how wet his mouth has gotten, his tongue slow and heavy against Kyle's. "But this is our first time," Stan says when he pulls back, nudging Kyle with his nose.

"Do you want to take a picture?" Kyle asks, and Stan laughs. He doesn't come, but he starts moving his hips soon after, fucking Kyle in shallow strokes until he's asking for more, begging, pulling on Stan's ass, and then Stan does come, shoving in hard. Kyle jerks himself off while he watches Stan's face, his eyes pinching shut and opening slow as he pants through the last of his orgasm, pupils blown, lids heavy. When Kyle comes he crushes his mouth to Stan's, making him swallow his moans.

Kyle isn't irrevocably changed until Stan slides free, slow and careful. He feels Stan leave him with a heart wrenching sense of loss, though there's relief, too, come spilling from his stretched-out body. He rolls into Stan's arms and tucks himself to his chest, letting Stan pet him like he's newly fragile. He is, it's true, and he doesn't mind Stan knowing.

"You came," Stan says softly, his fingers trailing down Kyle's spine, then back up again.

"Of course I came," Kyle says. He lifts his face and kisses the underside of Stan's chin. "You felt so good."

"Really?" Stan scoots down so that they're face to face. "Not just – too big?"

"No. I mean, is your cock a little overwhelming at first? Yes. But I want to, like. Learn it. I want to get really good at taking it."

"Kyle, goddamn." Stan is grinning. "You'll make me hard again."

They kiss for awhile, both of them sleepy but unwilling to close their eyes. Kyle's eyelids get heavy, and he yawns against Stan's lips, making him laugh.

"You're so cute," Stan says. "The way you squeak when you yawn."

"Shut up," Kyle says, smiling. He rolls over, tucking his back against Stan's chest. He can still feel Stan's come leaking out of him, and it's the kind of thing that would normally freak him out – bodily fluids, going to bed unclean, the sensation of anything dripping from anywhere. He loves this, though, weirdly, and he's flooded with a sense of accomplishment. He made Stan feel good and got filled up with the evidence. Maybe it's a dumb thing to be proud of, but he can't help it. He's smug, smiling to himself, warm in Stan's arms.

"I had a pretty good walk, before," Stan says. "It was nice out there, really quiet. Kind of eerie, though."

"I was worried about you," Kyle says. "How long were you gone?"

"I don't know, an hour? I had to think."

"Mm. What'd you think about?"

"You. How much I love you."

"Jesus, Stan." Kyle rolls over to kiss him. "I love you, too. I don't deserve you, though. I'm such an ungrateful asshole."

"No, you're not. It wasn't fair, what I was saying. I'm putting all the pressure on you, asking you to make the decision. I just want you with me all the time." He wraps Kyle up more tightly, his lips coming to rest against Kyle's forehead. "That's all I want."

"That's all I want, too," Kyle says. "But I wouldn't want to wreck everything for you, with football. What if they found out you're gay?"

"I was thinking about that, too," Stan says. "I was thinking maybe I should just tell them."

"What?" Kyle is suddenly wide awake, sitting up on his elbow. "No! No way. You'd have death threats. You remember those guys at the gas station? Cartman won't always be there with his gun."

"Yeah, well, maybe I don't need Cartman to take care of me. I could handle it. I would have allies, too, you know, if I came out. Not just enemies."

"Okay, and your allies would be there to pat your back, while your enemies would be firing at you from the stands."

"I think you're being a little dramatic."

"Your teammates would reject you! They would accuse you of staring at them in the locker room!"

"I bet some of them would be cool with it," Stan says uncertainly, mumbling.

"Yeah, maybe one or two. And how about the coaches? You'd have tobacco spittle in your locker every day, and they wouldn't let you start at quarterback. They'd make up some bullshit excuse about why an upperclassman should do it instead."

"Fine, forget it," Stan says. "You make valid points, Counselor Broflovski."

"I'm not being a lawyer, I'm being your concerned –" He stops there, not sure if he should say it.

"Boyfriend," Stan supplies. He draws Kyle back to him, tucking him against his chest. "You're my concerned boyfriend. Or hysterical boyfriend, to be more accurate."

"So, yeah," Kyle says, so happy that he wants to squirm like a four year old in footie pajamas, because it's finally Christmas morning. "Don't tell anyone. Except, maybe, you know. Your parents?"

"It won't be news to my mom," Stan says. "When she found out we hadn't talked since June she said, 'Stanley, what did you do?' I think she thought I scared you away by, you know."

"By randomly trying to kiss me? I'm flattered that she thought it was you and not me."

"My dad probably won't be surprised, either. Do your parents know about you?"

"Stan, everyone in South Park has known that I'm in love with you since middle school. Yes, my parents know. Ike, too. They were there, you know, when I got home from California. When I was a mess."

"I was a mess, too," Stan says, squeezing him. "That day. God, I was so worried, and then Kenny texted you and you said you'd left, and I was furious. I still had so much to say to you. I thought we'd have time."

"Time," Kyle says, feeling sleepy again. "Five days. Unless you have to fly out there on Thanksgiving?"

"No, we're all flying in on Friday," Stan says. "Everybody's going to be with their families for Thanksgiving."

"So, five days." Kyle sighs and presses his face to Stan's chest. "It's gonna go by so fast. Just like that road trip."

"Yeah, but this time we won't have to listen to Cartman's crap, or get chased by hillbillies, or rush you to the hospital –"

"God willing. Don't jinx it."

Kyle sleeps very deeply, warm and exhausted, distantly aware that he's in bed with Stan again, and that they're closer than they've ever been under the blankets. Some part of Stan is still inside him and always will be, no matter how far away he is. He wakes at dawn and rolls over, pressing back against Stan as he gets comfortable again. Stan sighs in his sleep and readjusts himself around Kyle, tucking him to his chest like he's a stuffed toy. Neither of them ever slept with stuffed animals, and in Kyle's case it was because he wouldn't want to appear babyish in front of Stan. It's funny, now, because Stan has seen him at his softest, lying on his back with his legs spread, and Stan was the one who looked scared. When Kyle falls asleep again he dreams that he's in the stands at South Park High, watching the players on the football field and searching for Stan, who appears at his side, wearing his jersey but no pads or helmet.

"What are you doing here?" Kyle asks, confused. "You're supposed to be playing."

"No, I'm not," Stan says. He puts his arm around Kyle and kisses him, letting everyone around them see, unafraid. When he pulls back he's smiling, calm in the face of Kyle's disbelief.

"Did Kenny tell you to do that?" Kyle asks, because in the dream this question makes sense. Stan laughs and shakes his head.

"No one told me to, dude," he says. "I just wanted to."

"But, Stan, the game –"

"Fuck the game, Kyle. This is where I want to be."

They kiss again, and Kyle is elated, because this is a resolution to all of their problems: Stan wants to be with him. This is what he's been trying to drill into Kyle's head, and in the dream Kyle finally gets it, opening his mouth for Stan's tongue, letting everyone stare.

When he wakes up Stan is still sleeping, snoring a little and drooling on his neck. Kyle shifts and Stan moans as if to warn him against moving again, but he sits up anyway and looks out the window. The snow has stopped, but it must have been falling all night. Kyle can see the building's front entrance from his window, and it's almost completely blocked off by the snow.

"Kyle?" Stan says, groping for him, his eyes still closed.

"I'm here," Kyle says. He gets back under the blankets and wraps around Stan, kissing his messy hair. "I think we're snowed in," he says. Stan grunts.

"Good," he says.

The days blur together, a languid combination of sex and junk food, warm blankets that smell like their come. They laugh at porn on Kyle's laptop and try new things on each other after night fall, Stan fucking Kyle a little harder every night, until that feels like the only word Kyle knows, until he's grabbing Stan's ass and growling it out, *harder, harder, harder*. When Stan has finished, pulled out, when he's petting Kyle in the aftermath, both of them still breathing hard, Kyle feels bodiless with satisfaction, perfectly tired, well-used and buzzing. He wants a picture of himself like this, an invisible one, or maybe one that only Stan could see. He can feel Stan wanting it, too, and trying to memorize the way Kyle looks when he's softened and sleepy, separate from Stan again.

They venture outside, tunneling through the snow, and Kyle talks Stan out of breaking into the football stadium, but consents to tossing a ball that Stan found in the rec room around, letting Stan work out imaginary scenarios and tackle him into the snow. It's more fun than Kyle expected, and he's laughing hard every time Stan barrels into him, getting kissed when he's pinned. When they've had enough of the snow they romp through the mostly empty dorms, holding their laughter in when they cross paths with one of the other boys who stayed during the holiday. He's small and spectacled and looks relieved when he realizes they're not going to beat him up. Back up in Kyle's room, pulling each other's clothes off as soon as they're in the door, Kyle wonders if he should be quiet this time, just in case. He decides he

probably should, but when he's bent over the bed with Stan's cock pounding into him, he doesn't really care about being discreet, and he screams Stan's name when he comes.

Sleep happens at weird intervals, and they stay up talking all night, keeping their voices low like their parents might knock on the wall if they get too loud. Sometimes they're serious, holding each other's hands and talking about the future, but most of the time they're giggling like potheads, asking each other if they remember this or that from their childhoods and telling all the stories that accumulated during their time apart. Kyle plays music for Stan, rediscovering all the songs that will always be about him. They all sound different now, even "The Rainbow Connection," which Stan sings along to in a Kermit voice. Kyle laughs until he's crying, sitting between Stan's legs and wearing only his underwear and the ushanka, which Stan seems to have some kind of fetish for. He likes Kyle to wear it during sex, and since they're having sex every couple of hours, Kyle just leaves it on.

On Thanksgiving morning, they both resist waking, though they're restless as soon as grayish light comes through the window. They stayed up late the night before, Stan fucking Kyle slow, trying to see how long he could draw it out. They'll do it again tonight, their last night, not wanting to let go, but in the morning they won't be able to linger in bed like this, because Stan has a flight to catch. The roads have mostly cleared, the airports are open, and soon the world won't be on pause anymore.

"I should call my mom," Kyle says when they've lain together for a long time in silence, Stan with his fingers pushed under the flap of Kyle's hat, his thumb stroking across his cheek.

"Me too," Stan says, but he doesn't reach for his phone. He scoots closer, moving in for a kiss. Kyle can taste it on Stan's lips: he's so sad, already thinking about how little time they have left. He wants to make Stan feel better, feel good, so he rolls him onto his back and crawls down his body, kissing his chest, his stomach, the head of his cock. Yesterday they decided to take a break from sex, because Kyle was getting sore, but he feels fine now, wants more.

"Are you sure you don't want to do it to me?" Stan asks when Kyle reaches for the Cetaphil.

"Not yet," Kyle says. "Someday, maybe." He's way more nervous at the thought of doing this to Stan than he ever was about having it done to him. He likes being the one who gets to lie back and get worked over, and he likes this, too, sliding down onto Stan's cock while he lies there watching, his hands on Kyle's spread-open thighs.

"Goddamn," Stan says, his fingers tightening as Kyle sinks down lower. "Are you – *ah*. S-sure you're okay?"

"Mhm-hmm," Kyle says, letting his head fall back, his eyes closing as he seats himself, Stan's cock all the way in now. He's still a little raw, but not enough to make him want to stop, or go a full day without having this. He looks down at Stan, who is touching him absently, watching Kyle's face as his hands move over his chest and down to his cock.

"You look so good right now," Stan says. He sounds like he might cry, and Kyle doesn't want that, not yet.

"It's the hat," he says, adjusting it. Stan smiles, but his eyes are still sad, so Kyle moves on him, and everything but hazy pleasure is wiped from Stan's face.

They sleep again, then shower. Kyle calls his mother, who grills him until he admits that he's not alone, that Stan came to stay with him. She's suspicious about this development, and Kyle gets increasingly angry as she not very subtly implies that Stan is going to hurt him again. He's in a bad mood when he hangs up, and he walks back into the room, where Stan is stretched out on his bed, talking to his own mother.

"Yeah," he says into the phone, lifting his arm so Kyle can slip beneath it. "Mom, God. It's not an issue. Because it's just not, okay, can you trust me? Look, I gotta go. Yeah, okay. I'll see you Friday. What time are you getting in? Okay. Yeah, I'll be there at noon. Uh-huh. I'll tell him. Alright, Mom! God. *Bye*. Love you, too. Bye."

"She's coming to the Fiesta Bowl?" Kyle says, teasing one of Stan's nipples through his t-shirt.

"Yeah," he says. "She says hi, by the way."

"You told her about me?" Kyle smiles up at him.

"Of course. Didn't you tell your mom?"

"Yeah. I didn't really want to get into it over the phone, but she dragged it out of me."

"Was she happy?" Stan asks. "My mom was really happy. She actually said, 'say hi to my future son-in-law.'"

"Ha," Kyle says, flushing. "Yeah, um. She was happy."

They walk into town to find food, and end up having an early dinner at a Thai restaurant where they're the only patrons. The wait staff treats them like royalty, for lack of anything better to do, and they have a proper Thanksgiving feast, candles on the table and plates piled high with food. Kyle is impressed by how much Stan is able to eat, working his way through spring rolls, chicken satay, pot stickers, coconut soup and a big pile of massamun curry. The waiter keeps bringing more rice, and Stan keeps eating it.

"What?" Stan says when he notices Kyle staring, his fork poised over his ginger prawns.

"Nothing," Kyle says. He lowers his voice, leaning closer. "This is just kind of giving me a boner."

"What is?" Stan asks, shoveling more rice into his mouth.

"Watching you eat."

"Wow, really?" Stan sits up a little straighter, looking proud of himself. "I've gained fifteen pounds. Can you tell?"

"Uh-huh. Man, it's no fair. I've only gained five."

"I like you how you are," Stan says, reaching over to squeeze his waist. Kyle could refute that with some smart ass remark about how Stan likes his size because it makes Kyle feel more like a girl. He kisses Stan's cheek instead. He's afraid Stan will flush and check for onlookers, but he doesn't even look up from his rice, just finds Kyle's hand under the table and holds it.

The light is disappearing as they make their way back to Kyle's dorm, and Kyle is starting to feel panicked, beginning to count the hours. Stan will have to get up early for the long trip into Philadelphia. His flight leaves at one o'clock.

"You should come with me," Stan says when Kyle is quiet as they tromp through the hardened snow.

"Huh?"

"To the game. Come with me, I'll get you a hotel room and everything. We could have one more night together."

"No, I – I'm afraid it would be weird. We'd have to be so careful about – well, everything. I wouldn't be able to touch you." They're holding hands now, pressing close to each other as the wind whips around them. "And your mom will be there, anyway – it'd just end up being her interviewing us about how we're going to make this work, long distance –"

"My mom isn't worried about that," Stan says sharply. "And I'm not worried, either. I guess you are."

"You're not worried, really?" Kyle gives him a look of angry disbelief. "I get lonely when you get out of bed to go to the bathroom. I'm – when you're gone – it's gonna kill me."

"That's why I want you to come with me. To this game, I mean – even if it's not the most romantic trip ever, at least you won't be by yourself. You can sit with my mom at the game, and we can all go out to dinner together –"

"Then what, Stan? I'm still going to have to leave you!"

"No shit, Kyle, but what do you want me to do about it? I told you, I want you to move there. I know it's selfish and a lot to ask, but I don't think you get to bitch at me for having to go back there when you know I want you to come with me, and that I could make it happen."

"God, stop!" Kyle lets go of Stan's hand and puts his fists over his face. "You're making me crazy with this."

"You'd get to see Kenny all the time," Stan says.

"Really, Stan? You think that's going to sway me?"

"He's your best friend!"

"You're my best friend," Kyle says, stopping under the glow of a street lamp.

"I thought you didn't want to be called that anymore," Stan says. He takes Kyle's hands. "You're my boyfriend now. I want to – *fuck*, I want to tell people. I don't like this hiding shit."

"I don't like it, either," Kyle says. "As soon as you're done with football, we'll be out to everybody. We can buy tiny matching dogs and wear mesh tank tops if you want. But until then – I'm just thinking of you! Of protecting you."

"I don't need to be protected," Stan says. "I wouldn't fall apart if people found out."

"Yeah, but it would become your *thing*, you know? You'd be that out college athlete. People would focus more on that than how you played, and the pressure would get to you – I just don't think it's a good idea, okay?"

"Okay, fine." Stan drops Kyle's hands and starts walking again, leaving the glow from the street lamp. Kyle follows, and they walk the rest of the way in silence. Up in the room, they undress in the dark, and Kyle gets into bed wearing his sweater and boxer shorts, taking off his ushanka and putting it on the shelf near the bed. He pulls his laptop over, watching Stan from the corner of his eye. He's still in his jeans, looking at his cell phone.

"I'm going to Kenny and Butters' site," Kyle announces. "I've got to see this Thanksgiving special shit. Hopefully it's just food."

"Yeah," Stan says, not really listening.

"Did you get a text or something?" Kyle asks, irritated.

"Yep."

"From who?"

"Wendy."

"Oh. What's she want?"

"She's asking me how it's going."

"How it's going?" Kyle frowns, turning to look at him. "You've been in touch with her all this time?"

"I told her I was going here," Stan says. "On the bus, when I was freaking out. I had to talk to someone."

"So, what are you telling her?" Kyle asks. He turns back to his computer, too angry to really comprehend what he's looking at: Butters hugging Kenny's shoulders in front of a table loaded with food, wearing only a little white apron and a hat shaped like a turkey, its orange bird legs hanging down over his ears like a tribal headdress.

"I'm telling her that it's going well but that you're being a pain in the ass," Stan says.

"Do you want to fucking die?" Kyle says, glaring at him. "Why would you tell me that?"

"'Cause you asked."

"How am I being a pain in the ass, exactly?"

"By not coming back to California with me." Stan finally puts his phone down then, and he pulls off his shirt, then his jeans.

"Maybe I like it here," Kyle says.

"Then I'll transfer here," Stan says, walking to the bed.

"You will not! I'm not going to be the reason you quit your team. No fucking way."

"Kyle?" Stan says, crawling onto the bed, hovering over him and the laptop.

"What?"

Stan stares at him for a few beats, as if he's changed his mind about what he intended to say. He reaches down to close the lid of the laptop.

"If you want me to stop asking, I will," Stan says. "You should know, though, that you're breaking my heart."

"Don't say that." Kyle puts the laptop on the shelf and pulls Stan down to him. "I'm not trying to hurt you, I'm just being realistic." He holds Stan against his chest, petting him, sighing.

"I need you," Stan says, softly. Kyle moans and holds tighter.

"I need you, too," he says. "Oh, fuck, maybe I'll just drop out of college."

Stan snorts. "Yeah, me too. We can get in on the ground floor of this porn cooking show phenomenon. I hope you don't mind being the one who wears the frilly little aprons."

"And what would you wear?" Kyle asks, resting his cheek on top of Stan's head. "A jock strap?"

"Sure. Whatever brings in the bucks."

They spend most of the evening lazily making out, and Kyle finds himself praying for another blizzard, Fiesta Bowl be damned. The omnipresent clouds don't produce a single snow flake, and his plan to stay up all night long is foiled by ten o'clock, when Stan starts rubbing his back, melting him into an exhausted puddle. He wakes up to a dark room, Stan sleeping beside him. When he checks the clock, tears sting his eyes. It's three in the morning, and in another two hours the alarm will go off. Stan's taxi will be here at six.

"Hey," Kyle whispers, shaking Stan's shoulder. He knows he should let him rest, that he's got a long day tomorrow, but he can't lie here in silence and watch the minutes tick by. Stan wakes up with a moan, pulling Kyle to him.

"We fell asleep," Kyle says, crying properly now.

"It's okay," Stan says. He's still mostly asleep, petting Kyle's hair with one heavy hand.

"I should be wearing my hat," Kyle says, groping for it. "You – you like my hat."

"I like your hair, too," Stan says. "Just, here, lie down. It's okay. Don't cry."

"Don't cry?" Kyle hiccups a sob. "Stan. You'll be gone in three hours."

"You can still come with me if you want."

"No, I can't! I mean, I guess I could, but – but –"

"Kyle, shut up," Stan says. "I want you there. In the taxi, on the plane, at the game. As your boyfriend, I think you should respect my wishes."

Kyle snorts, wiping tears. "Oh, yeah? Is that how it works?"

"I think so, yeah. Enough of this shit, alright? You're still my best friend. If people see us together and think we're fucking, that's fine. I'm not gonna come out – you're right, now is not the time. It would be distracting. But I'm not going to worry about people wondering about me, either. I'm not going to have a fake girlfriend. So you can come to California. If you even want to."

"Of course I want to!" Kyle says, crying hard now, because there's no way it can be this easy. Stan can't just make these decisions for him, half asleep. Everything can't suddenly become clear in the middle of the night, but it's happening, and he's sobbing with relief now, because he can go with Stan tomorrow, and he wants to, he will.

"*Shh*, you're so worked up," Stan says, speaking softly, wiping Kyle's cheeks with his thumbs. Kyle can't stop crying, but he needs to, because he has to tell Stan that he's right, they can't be apart. The past five months were so hard, without him.

"I'm sorry," Kyle says, choking the words out, gasping his breath back in. "I'm sorry, I'm so stupid."

"You're not stupid," Stan says. He kisses Kyle's cheeks, leaning up on his elbows now. "You're the smartest guy I know."

"I'm coming with you," Kyle manages to sob out, nodding. "I'm coming with you, tomorrow, and then, a-after the semester ends –"

"Good," Stan says, whispering the word against Kyle's lips. They kiss, Kyle's chest still bouncing with sobs as he lets Stan lick into him, his breath stale and his mouth so hot. He wraps his arms around Stan's neck and hooks a leg over his side, holds on tight.

"I'm never letting you go again," Kyle says, sniffling and shaking his head. "It's too hard. I can't do it, I can't even be who I am without you. It doesn't work."

"I know," Stan says. His voice is shaking now. He kisses Kyle again, climbing on top of him. "I know, Kyle, God, I know exactly what you mean. Everything's a joke when you're not with

me."

They fall asleep like that, mid-kiss, Stan still on top of Kyle. The alarm scares them both when it goes off, and Stan scrambles to turn it off. The room is dark. Kyle is afraid that he'll lose his grip on his epiphany, but it's still there when Stan looks down at him, obviously nervous.

"Did I dream it?" Stan asks. "Or did you –"

"I said yes," Kyle says. He grins and blushes when he realizes how that sounds, like Stan asked to marry him. Stan's smile comes slowly, as if it's taking some time to accept that this is real. He leans down to Kyle and kisses him, his arms sliding under Kyle's arching back.

"Then let's go," Stan says, beaming now.

Kyle brushes his teeth, packs a bag, and leaves a note for Jacob. *Will be back Sunday. Ate all your oatmeal, sorry.* It was actually Stan who ate the oatmeal, two bowls a day until it was gone, but Kyle can explain about that later.

The taxi meets them out front, and Kyle feels like the driver is their personal angel, though he's just a stubby older man with a hands free phone strapped to his ear. As they're pulling away, Kyle looks back at his dorm, his chest aching when he thinks about what it would have been like to sit up in his room and watch from the window as this taxi took Stan away from him.

"I can't believe I was thinking about staying," he says, scooting closer to Stan, who smiles.

"It's gonna be fun," he says. "You guys will have really good seats. My mom's gonna be so happy to see you."

"And then?" Kyle says. He puts his hand on Stan's knee, the driver distracted by a phone call that he's conducting in a language Kyle doesn't recognize.

"Here's what I'm thinking," Stan says.

"Okay."

"Road trip."

"Road trip?" Kyle grins, thinking of last summer, Kenny and Butters snuggled up in the backseat, Cartman crunching Cheesy Poofs, Stan singing along with the radio, dry desert air blowing in through the open windows.

"When we move your stuff to California," Stan says. "We'll both fly to South Park to do the whole family thing and get your car, 'cause you're gonna need one in L.A., and we'll be on break anyway so we can take a week and drive that same route we took this summer, only we'll stay in hotels this time, 'cause it'll be too cold for camping. What do you think?"

"God, Stan, this is crazy – what if they won't let me transfer?"

"They'll do it as a personal favor to me," Stan says. "As long as we win the Fiesta Bowl."

"Well, goddammit, you'd better win, then!"

"I will! So? Do you like my road trip idea or not? Just me and you this time?"

"Just me and you," Kyle says, grinning. "Yeah. I like that idea."

It's a long drive to the airport, and Kyle falls asleep on Stan's shoulder on the way there, dreaming of the desert where they'll be landing in just four hours, clear skies and bright sun, the screaming thrill of a college bowl crowd. He wakes up thinking he's hearing another alarm, afraid that his happy ending will evaporate when he opens his eyes, but it's just his phone buzzing with a new text message, and Stan is still at his side, asleep with his head resting against Kyle's.

Kyle is careful not to wake him as he digs out his phone. He opens the message, which is from Kenny.

you okay?

It's the first time Kyle has ever seen Kenny use actual punctuation in a text; he must be really worried. Kyle is grinning as he composes his response, and he wishes he could see Kenny's face when he reads it.

I'm good. Headed out west with Stan. For good, I think, pretty soon.

Kenny's response comes quickly, and it makes Kyle grin harder:

bout time brofloski

Sixteen years of friendship and Kenny still can't spell his last name. It's a comfort somehow, one of those things that will never change. Kyle puts the phone down and turns toward the window, his cheek pressed to Stan's forehead as he watches the frosted landscape pass by. This is what the country will look like when he drives toward California with Stan next month, if all goes according to plan, but eventually the cold with be behind them, and the day when they cross the border into California won't be the end of their adventure together, it will be the beginning.

Chapter 8

On the morning of graduation, Kyle wakes up before the alarm goes off. He drank too much last night, and stayed up too late talking to Kenny. He crawls across the bed and finds Stan still asleep, feverish with warmth under the blankets. Kyle puts his chin between Stan's shoulder blades and stares at the window as the slats of light between the blinds begin to brighten. He can already feel the heat of another smog-choked summer afternoon perching at the edge of the city, ready to blanket it. For the past year all he's done is bitch about how he's ready to leave L.A., but he's actually going to miss the blurry non-seasons, the haze that burns off around noon, avocado trees and bubble tea. They have bubble tea in New York, but it won't be the same, from that place near the Metro stop in Koreatown with the scummy sidewalk view of the Hollywood sign.

“Are you awake?” Stan mumbles incredulously when Kyle starts licking the back of his neck, his default method for waking Stan up on weekend mornings.

“You need a shower,” Kyle says. “You taste like a taco shell.”

Stan grunts. “You smell like an ash tray,” he says.

“Kenny smoked like three packs of cigarettes last night. He tainted me.”

“I thought he quit?” Stan turns his head on the pillow, pressing his face to Kyle's.

“He did, but sometimes he gets drunk and forgets,” Kyle says. “Butters will kill him. You guys were so cute last night.”

“Me and Butters?” Stan makes a face.

“Yeah, we came in and you were both asleep.”

“Not cuddling, though,” Stan says. He looks worried, and Kyle laughs.

“No, sadly. He was on the couch and you were on the love seat. It was companionable, though, like you guys got together and decided to give up on us.”

Stan groans and rolls onto his back, offering his chest as a pillow. Kyle puts his cheek against it and deflates, sliding his knee up to check to see if Stan has morning wood. He does, and he rolls his hips up when Kyle rubs him with his knee.

“What'd you guys talk about?” Stan asks.

“Me and Kenny? Who knows. We were trashed. He kept bringing up the first time I smoked pot.”

“Oh, God. You thought you were going to die.”

“Yeah, and Kenny continues to find that hilarious. He said I should have been there the first time he got Butters stoned. Apparently they walked down to the beach and Butters got emotional about the sand.”

“The sand? How so?”

“It was something like – the individual grains of sand – the fact that they all make up the beach – I don't know, that made him cry.”

“Ha.” Stan's hand slides down Kyle's back and settles on his ass, squeezing. “I can't believe he's our fucking graduation speaker.”

“Maybe he'll talk about sand.” Kyle was actually part of the committee that arranged to have Leopold Stotch give their graduation address. Butters is a self made man, a multi-millionaire at twenty-two, following a tearful Dateline interview and the subsequent success of his cooking show, which now airs on the Food Network instead of a website that also features him getting rammed by Kenny. Butters wears clothes when he cooks now, but the fact that anyone who's curious can find out what he looks like without them has made him a celebrity. That and the fact that he's somehow remained charmingly, inexplicably innocent. He's a really good cook, too.

Kyle slips beneath the blankets and takes Stan in his mouth, fighting the beginnings of a headache. He wants to lose himself in sex before he starts thinking about everything he'll have to do today. His parents and Ike are flying in this morning, and he's got to pick them up at the airport, and find out if Stan actually secured reliable accommodations for his own parents, call the caterers about the food for the party, make sure the camera is charged, run by the liquor store on the way back from the ceremony –

“Dude, are you listening?” Stan asks, tugging on one of Kyle's curls. Kyle pulls off of him, breathless.

“Wha?”

“I asked if you wanted to sixty-nine,” Stan says.

“Oh, um, sure.” It's a good idea, time-saving. Kyle assumes the position, his to-do list evaporating when Stan spreads him open and starts licking him in his slow, expert way. Soon Kyle can't even focus on sucking dick, just rests his head on Stan's thigh and moans, melted.

“Sorry,” Kyle breathes out when Stan lifts him up and turns him over onto his back.

“For what?” Stan asks.

“For, um, I don't know, I kind of slacked off on the dick sucking there,” Kyle says. “On my half of the – *ahhh*, Stan. Half – the – my half of the s-sixty-*nuhh*—”

“That's okay,” Stan says, grinning and watching Kyle go to pieces around his fingers.

It's especially good, the way it always is when they're dreading the arrival of their families or a trip back to South Park. They start to feel like their old selves in the presence of their

parents, the boys who were afraid of each other in high school, the kids who didn't get to do this everyday. Stan gets possessive and Kyle clings desperately, letting his head fall back while Stan fucks him, surrendering his neck to hickeys. It seems like Stan always goes out of his way to mark him before a visit from Kyle's mother, as if he wants to show her that Kyle is his now. Stan fights with her sometimes, raised voices and all, and it shouldn't make Kyle hard, but it does, because anytime Stan gets loud on his behalf it's arousing, and it's best when he's defending Kyle against his mother, telling her to *Back off, Sheila* like they're grown-ups or something.

He supposes they are grown-ups at last, fucking hard on the morning of their college graduation, on a mattress that they picked out and paid for together. Kyle works in the law library on campus, and Stan is a part-time cell phone salesman. He still has some money leftover from the football years, which ended when the considerable bulk of a Longhorns linebacker named Houston Horn cracked Stan's throwing arm in two toward the start of his junior year. Kyle was in the stands, and though he was much too far away and it was far too loud, he swears he heard Stan scream when his bone broke through his skin. Ironically, it was during the recovery period when they were exposed: a clerk at the physical therapy center posted pictures of Kyle kissing Stan on his Facebook, and in a few hours the pictures were everywhere. Kyle wanted to sue, but Stan didn't, though he was the one most vulnerable in the pictures, his pained and tear-slick face fully visible. Kyle was merely a red-haired comforter who was pretty obviously not just a friend and definitely not female. His rage got so out of control in the aftermath that at one point he was thinking seriously about enlisting Kenny to help him murder the man who posted the pictures, but Stan was strangely calm about the whole thing, and seemed relieved to be able to issue a statement. The statement was: I'm gay, that red-haired guy is my boyfriend, and I think you can all understand why I didn't say so sooner. He never rejoined the team, claiming that his arm just wasn't the same, and Kyle didn't press him to admit that he was too scared to walk back into that locker room. He knows Stan misses football, can see it when he watches the games on TV, but he does seem happy to be formerly rather than currently famous, and always gets kind of giddy when he touches Kyle in public without fear, smiling over at him like they're getting away with something.

The alarm goes off right when Kyle is about to come, and the jerk of surprise that shoots through him somehow makes his orgasm incredibly powerful. He arches and shouts, distantly aware that Stan is close, too, the rhythm of his thrusts disappearing into something desperate and erratic even as he reaches over to smack the alarm off. Stan drops down onto Kyle when he comes, his mouth open on Kyle's cheek, panting hot and wet. Kyle turns to kiss him, and they lie there for a long time, still sleepy and indulging in their recovery. Kyle laughs when the alarm starts blaring again.

"You hit *snooze*?" he says as Stan pulls out of him and crawls over to turn it off.

"I wasn't thinking!" Stan says. He comes back to Kyle and dumps himself at his side, rolling Kyle toward him and holding his hip. It's too hot to cuddle, so they settle for pawing at each other.

"Excited to see your parents?" Kyle asks, and Stan shrugs.

"I guess," he says. "You know how my dad gets."

"He wants to see celebrities."

"Yeah. He thinks Butters can get him the hook up to Hollywood parties."

Kyle snorts. "Has he met Butters?"

"He hasn't seen him in years," Stan says. "So he assumes that Hollywood has turned him into a hard partying coke head, naturally."

"Oh, God." Kyle winces. "Butters on coke. He'd put frosting on everything in the house."

"He'd paint the walls with frosting," Stan says, grinning.

"He'd frost himself," Kyle says. "And roll himself in sprinkles. Ew, okay. This is going to a weird place."

"Yeah, 'cause I'm pretty sure he actually did that in one of their old videos, sober. Should we shower so we don't smell like Mexican food and cigarettes when our parents get here?"

"I could tell my mom I've started smoking," Kyle says.

"What, what, *what*? No way, dude, she'd blame me."

They shower together, Kyle trying to convince Stan that his mother doesn't hate him. She's finally begun to trust that Stan isn't just toying with Kyle; apparently the public statement he made on national television that Kyle was his boyfriend wasn't enough, but his willingness to move to New York with Kyle so he can go to law school at Columbia seems to have done the trick. It's only fair, Stan says, since Kyle moved to California for him the first time around. They're not sure what Stan is going to do in New York, but it won't be a pressing issue right away, because they'll be living with Kyle's aunt and uncle, and with Ike, who will be returning to Columbia as a sophomore.

"I can't believe I'll be back to sharing a bathroom with my brother," Kyle says as Stan washes his hair for him, the scalp massage giving him a half-boner.

"I think it'll be fun," Stan says. "Ike's awesome."

"Yeah, but shower sex, Stan. Shower sex!"

"We don't actually *do it* in the shower," Stan says, because they tried that once and it was massively uncomfortable. "I don't think anyone will object to the idea of us, like, bathing together."

"It's still sexual! And you know how - blunt Ike is. He'd come in and tell us to pause while he takes a piss."

"Yeah, but you can't beat a rent free mansion."

"It's not a *mansion*. I mean, yeah, their house is pretty impressive, but it's not like they're just handing it over to us. We're going to have to abide by their rules."

"What, like - keeping kosher?"

"No!" Kyle considers this. "Well, maybe, at their dinner table, anyway. And they're going to want me to go to services with them, God."

"I'd go to services," Stan says. Kyle rolls his eyes. Stan took four years of Hebrew for his language requirement, and he thinks Judaism is *interesting*, though Kyle suspects he really just thinks it's Kyle-related and therefore cute. It's the one thing that's guaranteed to charm Kyle's mother, despite whatever they might have been bickering about. As soon as Stan starts asking questions about the faith Kyle's mom will happily indulge him, probably hoping he'll convert.

After drying off and dressing, Kyle is quickly in frantic productivity mode, making phone calls and jotting notes about flight times and restaurant options for the post-ceremony brunch. He's having both families and some friends over to the house for dinner, and he'll need time to clean and prep the non-catered food, so he'll have to duck out the brunch early, maybe leaving Stan to entertain the families. He pinches the bridge of his nose, imagining how poorly that might go.

"I just got a text from Wendy," Stan says. He's lounging on the couch, a *Deadliest Catch* marathon playing on TV.

"Is she going to be able to come down?" Kyle asks, not sure which answer he's hoping for. He loves Wendy, and largely credits her for making something substantial of Butters' career, but he's still jealous of her on a daily basis. He's no longer jealous of her relationship with Stan - at least, not usually - but he is jealous of her professional success. She finished her undergrad degree at Berkeley a year early, and she's moved on to their law school with a focus in entertainment representation. She's already managing two successful clients, Butters and Jimmy Valmer, who has done the Jimmy Kimmel show twice. Apparently the two have a special connection, maybe just because of the name. Kyle suspects it has a lot to do with Wendy, who has a powerful combination of sincerity and ruthlessness when it comes to her clients' interests.

"Yeah, she's coming down," Stan says. "Do you think she'd let Butters do a public appearance without her there to hold his hand? And guess who's coming with her?"

"Oh, *God*."

Kyle hasn't seen Cartman since the holidays, when they all flew home to South Park together in a private jet that Butters chartered for them as a Christmas present. Cartman was historically obnoxious on the flight, drunk and singing Christmas carols, and he was all over Wendy, which infuriated Kyle, because he thought Stan might be sensitive about that. Stan proceeded to get drunk with Cartman and sing along, and when Butters and Kenny joined in Kyle was left to hide in the kitchenette with Wendy, where she regaled him with stories of her successes over the past year. Finally, Kyle resolved to get drunk himself, but just ended up getting air sick, which made Cartman laugh hysterically. Kyle doesn't even remember

deplaning or the car ride back to his parents house, just woke up in his childhood bedroom with Stan rubbing a cool washcloth over his sweltering forehead. He ended up having the flu for most of the winter break, for which he blames Cartman and, partially, Wendy. In general, those two are bad luck for him.

"I've got to go grab Ike and my folks," Kyle says when he's finished his breakfast: honeydew melon and half a bagel with low fat cream cheese. After four years of being Stan's drinking buddy, Kyle is actually developing a not-concave stomach, which is completely unfair, because all Stan seems to need to do to maintain his college athlete abs is a set of sit ups before bed. Stan claims to love Kyle's new softness, but Kyle doesn't want to hear it. He's switched to light beer, Diet Coke, and never eats a full serving of carbs in one sitting.

"Want me to come with?" Stan asks, tipping his head over the arm of the sofa to watch Kyle heard toward the door.

"No, Stan! Remember, you have to get your mother at eleven, and then your dad's flying in at noon. The ceremony is at two - I've got to get my parents and Ike settled in their hotel, then I have to get my hair cut, and we're meeting at the ceremony, remember?"

"Oh, yeah." Stan rubs his eyes as if he's bored by all of this and considering a nap. "Kay. Cool."

"Your phone had better be charged!" Kyle says, his hand on the door knob.

"It is!" Stan says. "I mean, I think it is. I'll check."

"Go check now!" Kyle says. He looks at the clock by the door and groans. "I've got to go, traffic is going to be *terrible*. USC is having their graduation today, too. Can you fucking believe that? The lack of planning? It's like they did it on purpose, just to be assholes!"

"Kyle," Stan says. "It's fine. Everything will be fine. It's nine o'clock in the morning."

"Nine thirty!"

"Whatever. We've got plenty of time. Go get those guys, and tell them I said hi. Actually - wait."

"What?" Kyle asks, already halfway out the door.

"C'mere."

"Why? Stan, I'll be late -"

"Gimme a kiss," Stan says, reaching for him. Kyle groans and obeys, walking to the couch and kneeling down for a Spiderman kiss. Stan grins at him sleepily when he pulls back.

"You're so calm," Kyle says, combing his fingers through Stan's upside-down hair. "How do you do it?"

"It's easy," Stan says. "I let you panic for both of us."

"Ha. Okay, asshole." Kyle kisses him again and stands. "See you at the ceremony."

As he predicted, traffic is bad. He's tempted to shop for a big, sugar-filled coffee as he passes one Starbucks, then another, but he doesn't need the calories or the elevated anxiety. He's not sure what he's most worried about: Butters' speech going well, seeing his mother, or enduring Wendy's perfection and Cartman's big mouth. There's also something about a graduation in general that makes him nervous, probably because of the state his life was in last time he walked across a stage to accept a diploma. He has to keep reminding himself that he'll get to keep Stan this time.

The airport is slammed and parking is a nightmare, and by the time Kyle finds his family near the baggage claim they seem like they've been camped there for awhile, carry-on bags piled around their feet. His mother pops up to hug him first, telling him he looks skinny, though he's only managed to lose five of his excess pounds since Christmas. His father is talking over her, complaining about the service on domestic flights these days, and Ike just grins as Kyle pulls him into a hug and clings maybe a little too long. Having Ike around makes dealing with their parents marginally less overwhelming.

"Kyle, this hair," his mother says, molesting it. "A little long, don't you think?"

"I have a hair cut in an hour," Kyle says. "Hopefully we can get you guys settled in before -"

"A hair cut on the day of graduation? That's cutting it a little close!"

"Yes, ma, but I've been totally swamped this week, I've got all this stuff to do before we move, plus the -"

"I still don't see why you have to move so early in the summer, bubbeh," his mother says as they all begin to gather up the bags. "Ike isn't going back to New York until August! It'd be nice to give Aunt Laura and Uncle Mel a break."

"Mom, I told you, my program has all this social shit going on during the summer, I really need to meet people if I'm going to distinguish myself -"

"Just tell people you're friends with Leopold Stotch," Ike says. "That'll distinguish you plenty."

"Ike, no!" Sheila says, horrified. "Kyle, I know you're supportive of your little friend, and he's been quite successful, which is great -"

"He could buy and sell our whole fucking hometown!" Kyle says.

"Language, Kyle," his father says.

"But he's still associated with, well, some unsavory things -"

"Porn," Ike says.

"Ike! Well, anyway, Kyle, I really don't think it would be smart to try to open doors for yourself with *that* name -"

"I wasn't planning on it, Mom," Kyle says, though he's offended on Butters' behalf. Butters isn't ashamed of his background, and Kyle was never ashamed to call him a friend, even during the porn years. "Ike was just joking."

There's a lot of chatter in the car on the way to the hotel, Kyle up front with his mother and Ike in back with their dad. Ike is a genius but a man of few words, and Kyle wishes he would cut in more frequently as he endures a lecture about oil changes from his mother and a shitload of unwanted law school advice from his father. Contrary to popular belief, he's not just going to law school so he can follow in his father's footsteps. He doesn't want to be a plaintiff's lawyer or a litigator. He's more interested in mediation, which is less stressful and more profitable, though he knows he'll need years of experience practicing law before he can break into the mediation business. It's going to be a long road, but he's excited about his career, and he wishes Stan could figure out something to be excited about in that area, too. His major was Nutrition, but he doesn't want to get a doctorate, and he's not sure if he wants to go to grad school, get his teaching certification or find work at a gym. He seems content to hawk cell phones for the time being, and he's making a pretty good commission. His talent as a salesman has a lot to do with his looks, and though Kyle is banking on Stan being good looking for most of their lives, he doesn't want him to make a career of it.

"So, where's Stanley?" Kyle's mother finally asks. They've been in traffic for an hour and they're finally approaching the hotel where Kyle has arranged for them to stay. He's going to have to push his hair cut back by at least thirty minutes.

"Stan's picking up his mom right now," Kyle says, glancing at the clock on the dash. "Or, he should be."

"I see. Is his father flying in, too?"

"Yeah. He gets in an hour later. I think Stan's going to get a late breakfast with his mom at the airport and hang out until his dad gets there."

"Oy, really? Do Sharon and Randy get along alright these days?"

"I think so," Kyle says, his stomach aching at the thought of Stan enduring an afternoon of his parents. Stan can occasionally revert to adolescence in their combined presence, growing dark and quiet.

"Oh, God, Randy's gonna be here?" Ike says. "Hell yes."

"What's so exciting about Randy?" Gerald asks, sounding hurt.

"That guy can party," Ike says.

"Ike, you're not here to party!" Sheila says, turning to glare at him. "We're here to congratulate your brother on his academic success. And you're underage, young man!"

"Oh, Mom," Ike says.

"What?"

"Nothing. You're just so - quaint."

"*Excuse* me? What's that supposed to mean?"

Sheila rails at Ike for the remainder of the car ride, which is mercifully brief. Kyle is able to exit the hotel quickly after helping them with their bags, his hair cut a good enough excuse for his mother. This is partly the reason he scheduled it for today. He gets out his phone and checks for messages. There's one from Kenny, but nothing from Stan. Kyle opens Kenny's and reads it while he's stopped at a red light:

how much did i smoke last night whoa bc is pissed

'BC' is Buttercup, the name Kenny uses for Butters when he's particularly sentimental or apologetic. The light changes before Kyle can compose a response, but he doesn't really have one in mind, anyway. He has no idea how much Kenny smoked last night, outside of 'a lot,' and he doesn't know what to tell Kenny in terms of getting Butters off his back. Kyle actually agrees with Butters, and was berating Kenny for smoking until he got too drunk to give a damn. They stayed up all night with their pant legs rolled up and their feet in the pool, and Kyle is pretty sure that they both got emotional about Stan and Butters at one point, considering themselves poetic as they slurred, *no really, dude, I just love him so much, you don't even know*, or something similar.

He's five minutes late for his hair cut, and his stylist is a little bitchy about it until Kyle explains that his parents are in town for his graduation. After that, Caesar fawns over him sympathetically and offers him a glass of wine. Kyle declines, then reconsiders and accepts.

"So is your mom cool with you and your boy?" Caesar asks as he's working.

"Yeah, mostly," Kyle says. "I mean, she's known Stan since he was four."

"But she's okay with you catching his pitches and all that?"

"I guess," Kyle says, flushing. He sort of hates this salon, but he can't take his hair to just anyone. He drinks more wine, wincing when he realizes that some snipped red hairs have floated into the glass.

"Are you still friends with that little bubble butt on the eating network?" Caesar asks. Like most other gay men in L.A. who think they should have their own reality show, he's extremely jealous of Butters.

"Yes, we're still friends," Kyle says. "I was just over at his house last night."

"Uh-huh. It is like some big tacky mansion in the hills?"

Kyle thinks for a moment. "Yes." That's exactly what Kenny and Butters' house is. They have seven bedrooms, and Kyle is pretty sure Butters wants to fill all of them with babies. Kenny has promised him that they can talk about adoption when they're in their thirties, and he gets a little green when Butters starts musing about how someday the guest bedroom in the west wing will be a giraffe-themed nursery.

"That's just the way it goes in this town," Caesar says, shaking his head. "You get famous for getting fucked."

Kyle wants to defend Butters, but he's afraid Caesar's scissors might slip vengefully, so he just hums and drinks more hair-flavored wine. This strategy pays off: when Caesar is finished Kyle's hair is soft and frizz-less, falling in tousled waves instead of goofy ass ringlets.

"Who's gonna make my hair look like this when I move to New York?" Kyle asks as he hands Caesar his tip.

"Somebody who will charge twice as much and do nowhere near as good," Caesar says. He kisses Kyle on both cheeks. "You have to fly back to L.A. for your hair cuts, okay?"

"Okay," Kyle says. "I'll make Butters play for the flights."

"If he cares about you, he will do it."

Kyle thanks him and leaves, not sure if Caesar thinks Butters is his pet name for his boyfriend or understands that he's talking about his friend the celebrity chef. Butters goes by Leopold professionally, which is apparently part of his charm. Die hard fans from the old days would know him as Butters, since - apparently - that's what Kenny called him in their videos. Leopold doesn't exactly roll off the tongue during sex. Apparently.

Kyle feels a little tipsy after leaving the salon, despite the fact that he only had one glass of wine. He walks to a Starbucks and drinks a whipped cream-laden latte while checking his phone messages. He has one from his mother asking who's going to pick them up for the ceremony, as if she expects Kyle to send Kenny or something. He writes back and says that he'll be there shortly, lingering over his coffee and smiling when he sees a message from Stan buried under his mother's.

parents are both in state. dad annoying. mom blond?? rescue me or send comfort pls

Kyle kisses the screen of his phone, feeling like an idiot. He types out some more tangible comfort and sends it to Stan:

When they're all secure in their hotel rooms tonight I'm gonna give you a special graduation present.

Stan's response comes quickly:

yeah??

Yes, Kyle sends. *And my hair looks really hot*.

ur so gay :)

Says the guy who uses smileys in his texts. And fucks me.

too shay

Kyle is in a good mood on his way back to his parents' hotel, which is just a basic Holiday Inn. He offered to get them something nicer, but they didn't want him wasting his money. Kyle would have preferred spending more to enduring the comments they'll surely have about dust and water pressure, but he's learned to pick his battles and this visit won't be lengthy. His parents are flying home tomorrow night, both of them needed back at work. Kyle loves them, but always prefers to do so in small doses.

The rest of the afternoon passes quickly, and Kyle is constantly on the phone, with the catering company that he's using for the little party at his house and with Butters, who's complaining that Kenny and Wendy are in a fight over what he should wearing during his speech.

"Give me that," someone says in the midst of Butters' rant about whether or not he should be allowed to wear barrettes in his hair during his address to the UCLA graduates. They're a regular staple on his show, along with frilly aprons. He might be fully clothed on his show these days, but he hasn't given up his accessories.

"Is this Kyle?" Cartman barks into the phone. Kyle holds it away from his ear, rolling his eyes.

"Yes," he says, dragging the phone back reluctantly. "What do you want?"

"I hear you're doing the after party," Cartman says. "I was just wondering - are we talking open bar, or just some shitty boxed wine and domestic beer?"

"I'll have wine and beer, and *some* liquor," Kyle says, gritting his teeth and preparing himself to be called cheap. "And the wine is not shitty."

"Sure it's not, Kyle, sure it's not. Wendy and I just took our spring break in the south of France, so you'll excuse me if my standards are a little bit higher than yours."

"*You* went to *France*?"

"Yeah, and it fucking sucked! But what my ho wants, she gets. The wine was pretty good, I guess, but really, my point here is - how much pre-gaming do I need to do? Just shots, or like, a full on fifth?"

"Do not show up to my party trashed," Kyle says. "Our lease is up in three weeks, and if you fucking puke on the carpet -"

"Excuse me, I believe you're the expert in puking from being too lily soft to hold your liquor. I've got a liver of steel."

"Whatever - goddammit, Cartman, can I talk to Wendy?"

"Wendy is having a fight about Butters' hair accessories right now, can I take a message?"

"Yeah, the message is, 'don't let your oafish lush of a fiance puke on my goddamn carpet, and if you do, you're footing the cleaning bill.' Now put Butters back on."

"I hate you, Kyle," Cartman says, and there's a hint of whimsy in it that makes Kyle think he's already had a few beers with lunch.

"Kyle?" Butters says.

"Yeah, I'm still here."

"So what do you think? Wendy says it's unprofessional, but I wear those things on my show, and my show's real professional!"

"Butters, wear whatever you want. That's what this whole speech is about. That's why I picked you. You are who you are, and you don't let anyone tell you that you shouldn't be."

"That's right! Not even my manager!"

"Not even her," Kyle says, though he knows Butters will have his work cut out for him when it comes to talking Wendy into something that she thinks might hurt his image.

"Who was that, Kyle?" his mother asks when he hangs up. They're all lounging about the hotel room, Sheila ironing the suit jacket she'll wear to the ceremony, Gerald answering emails on his phone, and Ike staring at the television, the remote resting on his stomach.

"That was Butters," Kyle says. "And Cartman."

"Eric Cartman? Oy, don't tell me he went to UCLA, too?"

"No, he went to Berkeley," Kyle says. He joins Ike on the bed and flops down to stare at the TV. Ike is watching that cartoon about two brothers who look nothing alike. Kyle forgets the name of it, but it's pretty cute, and Ike says the two main characters are like them. One of them is short and red-haired, and the other one is a stoic but friendly foreigner.

"Berkeley!" Kyle's mother pauses in her ironing and turns to him. "Eric Cartman at Berkeley? That's - unexpected."

"Yeah, well, his girlfriend goes there," Kyle says. "Or, his fiancee, now, I guess, Jesus. She's the reason they're in town for the ceremony. She's Butters' manager, and she babysits him whenever he makes an appearance."

"Oh, that's right, the Testaburgers' daughter! We've heard she's quite the little go-getter."

"Her father acts like she's the next Scott Boras," Gerald says, frowning down at his phone. "Just because she's planning the social calendar of her little friends from school who happen to have gotten famous. Never trust an entertainment lawyer, Kyle! They're coattail riders at best."

"Okay, Dad," Kyle says. He gives Ike a look, and Ike grins.

"Whatever, man," Ike says. "Don't you guys know I'm going into entertainment law?"

"Ike!" Sheila takes her hand from the iron and puts it over her heart, gaping at him.

"Very funny, son," Gerald says. "I think we both know real estate malpractice defense is the only viable option for law students right now."

"But I want to represent rap stars!" Ike says.

"Oh, stop it with the funny business!" Sheila says, waving her hand in Ike's direction. "Is Eric Cartman in law school, too?" she asks, looking worried at the prospect.

"No, he majored in psychiatry," Kyle says. "He says he's going to disprove it as a science from the inside, or some crazy shit."

"That sounds like Eric," Gerald says.

Fifteen minutes later they're all getting ready to leave, Kyle warning them about the traffic and his mother asking him how on earth he managed to live here for almost four years. Kyle has his robe and hat in the car, and he worries as they ride down to the lobby that Stan will somehow forget his. He sends a text to remind him.

Cap and gown, dude?

Stan doesn't respond until Kyle is buckling himself into the driver's seat of his car, Ike up front with him now. Kyle snorts when he reads Stan's message.

yes dear I have my outfit

"What?" Ike says when he sees Kyle flushing as he puts his phone away. "Are you getting dirty messages from Stan?"

"Ike!" Sheila says.

"No," Kyle says, shoving his brother. "Just - ah."

"What?" Ike says. He pinches the side of Kyle's neck, making him cringe. "Tell us."

"He called me dear!" Kyle says. He flushes harder in the silence that follows, and hits Ike again when he fails to contain his laughter.

"You two are getting pretty serious, huh?" Sheila says.

"We've been serious, Mom," Kyle says. "I moved across the country for him. We live together."

"And he paid for your school," Gerald says, still sounding somewhat resentful about this. Stan only paid for Kyle's first two semesters. After that, he was able to secure a loan from the one funding source that would actually honor his credit: Butters, who is charging him no interest and has told Kyle he can pay the money back 'whenever he feels like it, no hurry.' Kyle should be able to pay for law school himself, since he'll get tuition reimbursement and a stipend for teaching freshman civics courses, but he's still glad to know that Butters has his back if he needs book money.

"Well, it had better be pretty serious," Sheila says. "Since Laura and Mel are taking him into their home."

"They've met him and they love him," Kyle says tightly. "They trust him to be good to me. I'd think maybe you would, too, after four years."

"Three and a half, and it's not that I don't think Stan is a good boy! It's just, well, Kyle, it will be a big change for him, moving into your world."

"New York is hardly my world," Kyle says.

"She means Jew world," Ike says.

"Ike!" Sheila shouts. "Don't be crass!"

"Your mother's just concerned about how Stan is going to adjust," Gerald says, the mildness of his tone only aggravating Kyle further. "It's very hard to find a job right now -"

"Stan will be fine," Kyle says. "People like him. He's the kind of guy who gets hired."

"In Los Angeles, maybe," Sheila says, scoffing.

"Just don't give him a hard time today, okay?" Kyle says. "He worked really hard to graduate on schedule with me. He had to take a lot of hard math courses for his major."

"For a Nutrition major?" Ike says, his genius-level snobbery surfacing in his tone.

"Yes!" Kyle says. "It's - a sciences major, okay? He's a bachelor of science. That involves math." Tutoring Stan in Calculus was one of the hardest parts of Kyle's college experience, but they got through it, and Kyle wonders if Stan remembers what Kyle promised to do for him if he managed to graduate on time. It was a deal they made years ago, and Kyle hopes he won't end up being more excited about going through with it than Stan, who might have been joking when he suggested it. Kyle has made extensive preparations over the past few months.

"I just don't want him to end up lounging around Laura and Mel's house while you go to class!" Sheila blurts after a few minutes of tense silence. "I'd be so embarrassed."

"Why would you be embarrassed?" Kyle asks. He cranes his neck to glare at her in the rear view mirror. "He's my boyfriend. I'd be embarrassed. And that's not going to happen."

"I don't know, Kyle," Gerald says, towing his mother's line as usual. "Maybe he feels like we owe him since he paid for your undergrad courses."

Kyle's parents are under the impression that Stan paid for his entire UCLA experience, not just two semesters. They'd be doubly horrified if they realized that a scholarship furnished by the porn industry actually footed the bill.

"Guys, lay off," Ike says before Kyle can explode. "Stan isn't looking for a free ride. He just wants to be with Kyle. That's what all of this has been about, right?" He whacks Kyle's thigh.

"Of course," Kyle says, squeezing the steering wheel. "Not that anybody listens to me when I say so."

"I listen," Ike says.

"Yeah, thanks."

"We're only thinking of you, bubbeh," Sheila says. "You know we adore Stanley, and you boys are very sweet together, but he does come from a broken home -"

"Look, we're here!" Kyle says, loud enough to make the air in the car feel tight again. "Wow, my college graduation, here it is! Maybe everyone could go easy on me for, like, an hour?"

"Sounds fair," Ike says.

"Kyle, calm down," Gerald says. Sheila just huffs and folds her arms across her suit jacket.

Kyle is glad that they're running late, for the excuse to hastily part from his family as soon as he's parked the car. He grabs his cap and gown and jogs into the stadium, following the instructions of the organizers who are herding graduates into alphabetical groups. Kyle ignores the section that he should be bound for and heads toward 'M-P,' pulling his gown on over his head as he walks. He leaves the cap off for the time being, wanting Stan to see his hair before it gets crushed.

It takes him much longer than it should to find Stan, who is not answering texts and probably left his phone in his car, or, God forbid, at some airport eatery. When Kyle finally spots him, wearing his cap and gown and talking to a puffy-haired girl who is about half his height, he breaks into a run and all but tackles him as soon as their eyes meet.

"Hey," Stan says. He wraps his arms around Kyle and lifts him up a bit, squeezing him. "Everything okay?"

"My parents," Kyle says.

"Oh, yeah. I feel ya. Hey, your hair." Stan pets it. "You went to that guy who hates Butters, didn't you?"

"He doesn't hate him." Kyle pulls back and runs his hand through his hair, enjoying its softness while he can. Soon it will be sweat-caked under his cap. "He just resents the success of others. I can relate. Jesus, you look cute." He glances at the girl Stan was talking to, checking to see if she's eavesdropping. She is, openly, beaming at them.

"It's so great to meet you, too," she says, sticking her hand out. "You're Kyle Breslinski, right?"

"Broflovski," Stan says before Kyle can. "And yeah, this is him."

"You guys are so brave!" she says as Kyle shakes her hand.

"Thanks," Kyle says, uncomfortably.

"You'd better go get in line," Stan says to Kyle. "It's about to start. Here, gimme that." He takes Kyle's cap and secures it on his head, arranging the tassel for him.

"Cartman is going to puke on our carpet," Kyle says, feeling ill with worry. He's thinking about Stan in New York, his possibly idiotic surprise for Stan tonight, Butters and his barrettes, everything that could go wrong in all arenas.

"If Cartman pukes on anything we own, I'll kick his ass," Stan says. He kisses Kyle between his eyes, ducking under the brim of his cap to do it. "And won't seeing that be worth the mess?"

"Maybe," Kyle says. He takes hold of the front of Stan's graduation gown, wanting a picture of him. There will be time for that later, but Kyle feels panicked at the thought that this moment will pass unrecorded.

"Are you okay?" Stan asks. He turns away from the admiring eyes of the girl in line behind him, blocking her view of Kyle with his body.

"I don't know," Kyle says. "Yes - no. I keep thinking about high school graduation. I'm having these awful flashbacks."

"I remember how hot it was," Stan says. He leans down to speak into Kyle's ear. "You were all sweaty," he whispers.

"Don't," Kyle says, but he's grinning. He kisses Stan on the cheek, more people staring now. Stan is still famous enough to make people wonder where they remember his face from. "Go graduate," Kyle says, pushing Stan back into line.

"I'll meet you by the front doors after, okay?" Stan says. Kyle nods, backing away. He feels like he'll wake from a good dream if he leaves Stan's sight, but he goes, holding his cap onto his head while he runs back toward the B's.

Kyle is in line to graduate between two people he's never seen before, and the anonymity of his huge graduating class makes him think again of South Park. That town is still with him all the time, in the friends that he's managed to keep, the stories that he can't stop retelling, and in Stan. Everything he loved about that place lives in Stan: swimming in Stark's Pond when it was recently unfrozen and only nature freak Stan Marsh and his trusty sidekick Kyle would dare the icy water, his ass going numb on the stands at the Friday night football games, and those long walks home after school when the seasons were changing, the way the air would suddenly smell different. Stan never failed to remark on that. He was a connoisseur of South Park air, and usually described the scents in terms of whatever holiday was forthcoming: it smelled like Halloween, Christmas, the Fourth of July. Kyle would consider this and agree, thinking about every holiday in terms of how they would spend it together. Valentine's Day was the only one he dreaded. Now they have a tradition of staying in and getting drunk on champagne while watching basketball. This year, Stan got Kyle a fancy cheese grinder as a Valentine's Day gift, because he was always complaining about what a pain in the ass it was to wash the cheap one they'd used for the past three years. Stan tied a little red bow around it and left it on the counter where Kyle would find it when he went in to start dinner.

So Kyle is thinking about his cherished cheese grinder as he watches Butters take the stage to applause and cheers. The student body was amused and enthusiastic about the committee's ironic choice of graduation speaker, but their laughter-laced reception only makes Kyle more tense. Butters looks nervous, too, his hands fidgeting around the podium as he smiles out at the crowd, two sparkling blue barrettes holding back a tuft of his blond hair.

"Well, hi there!" Butters says, and everyone laughs, because that's how he often opens his cooking show. Kyle can see him struggling not to rub his fists together, something he became famous for during that Dateline interview. Kyle still hasn't seen it, but apparently Butters discussed a variety of abuses that had been visited upon him by various members of his family, talked about how Kenny had saved him and how the porn experiment had both set him free and re-caged him. Stan emerged from their bedroom with puffy eyes after seeing it, and he told Kyle not to watch it, ever. Kenny went on a month-long bender after it aired; that interview is the one thing he and Kyle have never talked about.

"A couple of friends of mine asked me to come here today and give you guys some advice about making it in this sort of mixed up economy," Butters says. "I've been real lucky in the past couple of years, but I don't think my personal experience is gonna be real relevant for most of you guys, considering I took a pretty unconventional road and all."

There's some laughter, but it's quieter. Kyle wants to retract his offer to have Butters do this. It's too hard to watch him being judged by this sea of anonymous graduates. They weren't there when he was South Park's whipping boy. Nobody here helped him climb out of that hole in his backyard, Kyle and Stan included.

"I'm not much of a financial planner, anyway," Butter says. "I've just had a lot of help from my good friends, and I think that's what I want to talk about today. With things the way they are now, people can get real worried about how they're gonna make it. I know I was when I left home. But the one thing that hasn't changed about the world since the economy went bad is that there's still the same amount of good people in it. We mighta lost some material things, but we're all still here, aren't we? And if that's true, nothing important has changed too much. I woulda been lost without my friends after I finished high school, and without them I never woulda had the courage to try anything. And still, it was kind of scary to believe in other people. What if they let me down? What if I let *them* down? I'll tell you what, sometimes it's much easier to give help than to take it, and that's what a lot of you are gonna have to do."

Kyle wonders if Wendy approved this speech. It's verging on condescending, especially coming from a millionaire who is younger than quite a few of the graduates in the audience. Butters pauses and takes a deep breath.

"Four years ago I was sittin' up on a stage just like this one," Butters says. "Gettin' ready to graduate, and when I should have been excited and all that, I was just scared out of my wits and sad as heck. I didn't have any money of my own, and I felt trapped into doing something that I didn't want to do, just so I could maybe get a little money someday. But that wasn't why I was scared, and that wasn't why I was sad. All I could think about was what my life would be like if I lost my friends. Maybe I would have gone on and been a big success in college, but that wasn't what I wanted. Success would have been real hollow without the people I love. I know you folks don't need me up here telling you to appreciate the people you love,

but I guess what I do want to say is that you shouldn't be afraid to lean on them if you have to, or to let them lean on you. Take care of each other, because after all, that's the only reason any of us wants to be all rich and successful, right? So we can take care of the people we love."

Kyle feels like Butters is speaking directly to him, and he remembers this feeling from his high school graduation. He's asked Wendy if that part of her speech was intended for him, four years ago: *Tell the people who you love how you really feel while you still have time*. She laughed and told him she'd written that line for Stan, but it was about Kyle, so she'd subconsciously looked at him when she said it.

"A very smart friend of mine once said we're always told to believe in ourselves, but we need to believe in and trust our friends, too," Butters says. His voice has evened out now, and his hands are relaxed on the podium. "I'd take that a step further and say that, around our age, we're all told we're supposed to be figuring out who we are and what we want to be, but that sort of happens automatically, and sometimes the hard part is sharing who we are and what our dreams are with the people we care about. I kept a lot of myself hidden for a long time, and when it finally came out, *boy*, it really came out!" He beams then, telling the crowd it's okay to laugh, and when they do it's not unkind.

"If I can be metaphorical for a second here," Butters says, growing serious again. "You don't have to be buck naked on the internet to get free of whatever was holding you back, but sometimes it doesn't hurt in the long run, and if you had to get buck naked to get where you wanted to go, well, that's okay. You're gonna try a lot of different things, and you don't have to call all the half-starts mistakes. Keep a sense of humor, keep your friends close, and keep your clothes on if you want to, but don't be afraid to take 'em off, either. Growing up, I always got told that the world was just waiting to take advantage of me, that I had to be protected from it, and that's not always bad advice for a kid, but you know what? The world can be kind and understanding, too, and if it can surprise the heck out of a homeless runaway who survived pray-the-gay-away camp and just wants to make an honest living baking some gosh dang cupcakes, it can surprise you folks, too."

Kyle isn't sure at first that this was intended to be the end of Butters' speech, but this statement reaches such a crescendo that people burst into applause, the heavily pierced guy standing next to Kyle actually wiping tears from his cheeks as he whistles his approval toward the stage. Butters smiles and waves with both hands, barrettes sparkling in the sunlight, and that does seem to be the end of his speech, because he's stepping away from the podium. Kyle claps along with everyone else, well aware that his committee will be getting a lot of angry complaints about that naked on the internet metaphor, but really, what the hell does he care if some people didn't get it? He's out of here, done, moving on.

The collecting of diplomas takes forever and almost makes Kyle regret attending the ceremony. He's exhausted by the time it ends, and he's not sure how he managed to think they would be having a brunch after this. It will be four o'clock by the time they get to the restaurant where he's bumped back his reservation twice by text; they'll be there for happy hour. He finds Stan in their designated meeting place, standing beside his mother, who is indeed very suddenly blond.

"Kyle!" Sharon says when she spots him. He squeezes through the departing graduates and hugs her, giving Stan a wide-eyed look over her shoulder as her newly blond hair brushes his cheek. Stan makes a helpless hand gesture and shrugs.

"It's so good to see you," Kyle says to Sharon when he pulls back, and it's true. Sharon is the font from which all of Stan's calmness springs, and having her around makes Kyle feel so grounded. That weekend when they went to the Fiesta Bowl was more fun than Kyle had dared to anticipate, and he happily allowed her to grill him on the details of how Stan finally confessed his feelings. Most of the details, anyway.

"Look at you, Mr. Stylish!" Sharon says when Kyle pulls his cap off.

"Oh, yeah," Kyle says, trying to reinvigorate his dampened hair. "Aren't we supposed to throw these things or something?" he asks, lifting the cap.

"I think that only happens in the movies," Stan says. "Followed by a raging house party."

"Well, we are getting ready to go to a party," Kyle says. "You and Randy are both coming?" he says to Sharon.

"Yes," she says, and she laughs. "Don't look so frightened. We can be in the same room without killing each other these days."

"What did you think of Butters' speech?" Kyle asks, hoping to change the subject for Stan's sake.

"I cried," Sharon says. "Just a little. What a sweetheart. Stan sort of filled me on - things. The Stotches moved out of South Park years ago, I think because they were ashamed of him. It breaks my heart."

"He's a heartbreaker, that Butters," Stan says. "Wendy is considering branding him as America's Sweetheart."

"That's so stale," Kyle says, surprised she would consider it.

"That's what I said," Stan says, and Kyle is pleased to hear it.

They find Kyle's family and everyone exchanges loud greetings over the noise of the crowd, hugging and remarking mostly on Butters. Randy shows up and gives Kyle a bear hug, asking where the party is. Kyle has never been able to tell if Randy actually likes him or is just drunk in his presence most of the time. Even when he was a kid he felt this way.

"Guys!"

Kyle gets *deja vu* when he sees Wendy pushing through the crowd, but she's not wearing a graduation gown this time, though her hair is exactly the same as it was four years ago, when they were gathered outside the South Park Cows stadium in the heat. Today Wendy is wearing a short orange sun dress, ten pounds heavier than she was in high school and that much hotter for it. Heads turn as she moves through the crowd, and she hugs Kyle first, pointedly, he thinks.

"So?" she says as she moves to hug Stan. "What did you think?"

"A masterpiece," Stan says. "Did you write it?"

"No way! That was all Butters. I did gently suggest that he bring up the gay camp thing, because that's one of our issues. C'mon, everybody should come backstage! There's a bunch of food and stuff back there."

"Stuff?" Randy says.

"Booze," Wendy clarifies, and she hugs him.

They head into the stadium's makeshift green room, where Butters is sitting in Kenny's lap, bouncing a little, Kenny's arms looped around his waist. Cartman is picking over the buffet, a whiskey-colored cocktail in his hand. Butters gets up when the group of Marsh and Broflovski affiliates pour into the room, and everyone fawns over him for awhile, hugging him and complimenting him on his speech.

"I was real nervous," Butters says when Kyle takes his turn to hug him. "I'm not used to being up in front of people without a whisk and my knives and all that!"

"You did awesome," Kyle says. "I'm really proud of you, okay?"

"Okay," Butter says, smiling sheepishly.

"Wait, wait!" Sheila says when Kyle starts to move away. "Let me get a picture of you two!" Suddenly she's Butters' biggest fan, still blotting tears.

When Kyle has escaped his mother's camera he walks over to Kenny, who looks rough as hell, sipping water, still hungover. They slap each other's hands.

"I'd get up, but I'm dying," Kenny says.

"Mine never quite hit me fully," Kyle says. "I think it got lost in all the excitement." He goes to the buffet and pops a piece of cheese in his mouth.

"If I'd known we'd have this sweet spread I wouldn't have wasted my time on the phone with you before," Cartman says to Kyle, elbowing him. "I forgot Wendy's got Butters set up to get a feast for every speaking engagement, plus an open bar for me."

"Excuse me," Kenny says, bending backward to look at Cartman. "The open bar is for *me*. I negotiated that part of the contract."

"Well, you blew your liver out last night, apparently, so all the more for me." Cartman toasts himself and drains his glass.

"Everybody help yourselves," Wendy says, ushering them over to the buffet. "I keep adding stuff to his rider and they just keep giving it to him. Try the coconut shrimp, they're amazing."

"Butters' coconut shrimp are better," Kenny says.

"Well, of course." Wendy rolls her eyes. "But he's not going to cater his own green room."

"Keep working on the line of Leopold Stotch frozen foods and maybe someday he will," Kenny says.

"I don't want to do frozen foods," Butters says. He sits in Kenny's lap again, a bunch of grapes cupped in his hands.

"You should really consider it," Wendy says. "It's a huge market."

"How's Jimmy doing?" Stan asks. "We invited him to the party tonight but he said he had plans."

"Oh, yeah, he's in Chicago doing live shows this week," Wendy says. She pulls out her phone and taps the screen a few times. "He'll be back in L.A. on the fifth, you guys should get together with him before you move."

"God, I can't believe you're moving," Kenny says, groaning. "New York is a filthy snake pit. We have perfectly good law schools here."

"Now Kenny," Sheila says. "Don't make them feel guilty for perusing Kyle's educational dreams." She's at the buffet, pouring herself a glass of wine. Kyle realizes that this is going to be a big drinking day and hopes that Stan won't get too wasted. He needs him sober for later activities.

"Maybe we could tape the show in New York while Kyle is in school," Kenny says. He looks up at Butters, who nods enthusiastically, his mouth full of grapes.

"Sure!" he says. "Wendy says I should open a restaurant there, anyway."

"Yeah, and Kenny could be a bus boy!" Cartman says.

"Eric!" Wendy snaps.

"Man," Stan says, coming to stand beside Kyle. "Still gives me the creeps when she calls him that."

"What are you up to lately, Kenny?" Gerald asks.

"Smoking pot and being a kept boy," Cartman says. Wendy takes an apple from a basket full of them and throws it at him. Kyle shouts with laughter when it bounces off of his back.

"Whoa," Stan says.

"Ey!" Cartman says, but he continues constructing a cheese and cracker tower at the buffet.

"Act like an adult," Wendy says.

"But - uh!" Cartman gives her a helpless look. "That is what he does!"

"I'm writing my memoirs," Kenny says, muttering. He's rubbing his fingers over his eyes like the noise in the room is starting to get to him.

"Same thing," Cartman says, rolling his eyes.

Kyle cancels the impossibly late brunch reservation once and for all, and they camp out in the green room, snacking and partaking of the mini bar. Kyle limits himself to a small glass of wine, and is glad when Stan only drinks a few beers, though they still have the party to get through later. He could always postpone his surprise until the morning, but he's been waiting a couple of years already, and this has, insanely, become one of his top fantasies, maybe because he was afraid for awhile that it wouldn't come true.

"I'm gonna head over to the apartment and get everything set up," Kyle says when everyone is distracted by Wendy's story about some famous actress Jimmy met backstage on the set of the Jimmy Kimmel show.

"I'll come with you," Stan says.

"No, no, you've got to herd everyone there at six," Kyle says. "You stay." He kisses Stan's nose, then his lips. The party isn't the only thing he needs to set up for, and he feels kind of tingly already, thinking about what it will be like when the guests leave, when Stan is undressed in bed, waiting for his surprise.

"Alright, if you're sure you don't need help," Stan says. He looks a little sad, was probably hoping to have sex before the party. Kyle shakes his head.

"I'll be fine," he says. "I just have to run by the liquor store and get the food set up. I think between you, Wendy and Kenny you can carpool everyone there?"

"Sure," Stan says. He pulls Kyle back for another kiss when he tries to leave, and Kyle checks over his shoulder. Everyone is laughing at Wendy's story, ignoring them.

"I kinda wish we weren't doing this party," Kyle whispers to Stan. "It'd be nice if we could go back - just me and you."

"No kidding," Stan says.

"Oh, well, that'll make it better later." Kyle gives Stan's forehead an overly dainty kiss and pulls away. "See you in about an hour," he says, and Stan nods, giving him a sad little wave.

Maybe it's just the wine, but Kyle feels more at peace than he has in awhile as he sits in traffic on the way back to their apartment. Rush hour is his favorite part of the day, usually only if he's not actually driving, just for the way the light gets. He'll miss this in New York, though he's sure he'll come to love the light there, too. As he shops for last minute beer and vodka at the liquor store, he daydreams about what their lives in New York will be like. Stan will get a job in the city and commute with Kyle. They'll read together on the train, sharing a newspaper. Once a week they'll coordinate their lunch breaks and go to some amazing hole in

the wall place where you can get a cheap plate at the counter, crowded and humid and necessitating closeness. Stan will be clueless about the subway and Kyle will pretend to be an authority. They'll get lost and discover weird little neighborhoods. At the end of the day they'll ride back to Laura and Mel's house and take quiet showers together, have quiet sex, and join the family for cocktails before dinner. Stan will help with the dishes while Kyle and Laura fight about international politics. Mel will make them listen to old records. Kyle will get drunk and sentimental and make Stan hold him all night when it starts to get cold, the chill creeping in through the drafty old windows. Stan will smoke pot with Ike on the weekends, and Kyle will drag them to art openings, ignoring them when they have stoner commentary and raid the *hors d'œuvres*.

He's smiling to himself as he checks out, and when he leaves the store he's less romantic about the late afternoon light. He's ready to move on from this stage in their lives, the whole state reminding him too much of the football days and their unfriendly outing. The only thing he's not ready to leave behind is Kenny. Butters, too, with his standing invitation to dinner on Sunday nights, during which Kyle always gains at least three pounds and then proceeds to sit in their jacuzzi like a stuffed turkey in the fryer. Kenny and Butters have been a fixture in his life since he arrived here after his winter break road trip with Stan. The trip was pure indulgence, all fast food and fucking, but Kyle was still pretty wound up by the time they actually reached California, afraid that he wouldn't fit into Stan's real life. Kenny and Butters made the place feel like home, and he doesn't know how he would have survived Facebook-gate without them.

As if he's been tipped off to the fact that Kyle is thinking about him, Kyle's phone buzzes with a text from Kenny as soon as he starts his car.

you left

Yeah, Kyle sends back, *Have to do party stuff. How are things there?*

me randy and ike are outside doing a j while the rest of them yell at cartman for something he said

Wow. Even Butters?

no bc drove sharon and stan over to our place so sharon can see the pool and shit

Oh, Christ - so it's the Broflovskis and Wendy vs. Cartman?

something like that but i bet wendy will end up d-fending him

Kyle groans, annoyed with Stan for leaving his car at the stadium, though he doesn't blame him for wanting to escape the fireworks. He puts his phone away and drives back to their apartment, juggling the bags of booze as he lets himself in. There's a message from the caterers when he checks his phone again, and he calls back to tell them he's ready for their delivery. Butters offered to do the food for the party, and also offered his house as a venue, but Kyle didn't want to stress him out on top of the already formidable task of giving the graduation address, and he wants his and Stan's parents to see their place, modest though it is. It took Kyle a good part of their three years here to figure out how to display Stan's football

trophies respectfully but discreetly, and he thinks he's finally managed it, on the bookshelf in the living room, second shelf down, with a little potted cacti accompanying the Fiesta Bowl trophy and a votive candle holder with ironwork roses beside his Rose Bowl MVP. Stan calls it the gayest football trophy display in all of California, and Kyle says that's only fitting. Stan still gets calls from national networks asking for his opinion on gay athlete stories. He's among a dozen or so former college players who are out now, and Kyle suspects Stan gets the most lingering media attention because he's the most photogenic one of the bunch.

Before the caterers can arrive, Kyle goes to the bottom drawer of his dresser and digs out the package that's hiding under his winter sweaters. His heart starts racing as he goes into the bathroom to hide it under the sink for later, and he feels like an idiot in his excitement. He's nervous, too, afraid that Stan won't like this, and he hides the package well so that Cartman won't unearth it during a bathroom break and burst out into the party to humiliate Kyle to death.

Once the food arrives Kyle is preoccupied with party preparations, and he sets everything up on the narrow bar that looks into their kitchen, adding cocktail napkins, toothpicks, and rolled bundles of silverware. They're only having ten guests, and Kyle might have over-ordered, but he is an anxious host and it's always better to have leftovers than not enough. He sets up a makeshift bar on the kitchen counter, and he's laying out wine glasses when the first guest knocks.

"Hey!" his friend Stacy says when he opens the door. She thrusts a bottle of wine at him. "Am I early?"

"A little," Kyle says. "But that's okay, c'mon in." He takes the wine and hugs her hello. Stacy works with him at the law library and also graduated today, Pre-Law. Her father is on business in Japan and her mother is estranged in some manner that Kyle hasn't had the nerve to investigate, so he thought it would be nice to include her in their celebration, though he fears Ike will hit on her. She's Ike's type: older, blond, vaguely damaged.

"Fancy!" Stacy says when she sees the platters of food lined up along the bar. "Everything looks good. I don't want to be the first to dig in."

"Go ahead, I've already picked at it," Kyle says. He's starving, suddenly, and can't stop taking pieces of sushi from the long tray of rolls. "And feel free to stuff yourself, I ordered too much."

"Where's Stan?" Stacy asks, peering over her shoulder. Kyle is pretty sure she has a crush on Stan, which means Ike might be her type, too: tall with black hair and a kind of sex-infused zen.

"He's on his way, I think," Kyle says. "Last I heard he was with his mother and Butters, touring the Stotch-McCormick manor."

"Ooh, are Butters and Kenny coming?" Stacy asks. "My roommate always grills me for details about them. That speech was so cute today. The girl next to me was crying."

"The guy next to me, too," Kyle says. "And yeah, they're coming. Kenny is hungover and apparently stoned, too, so he might pass out on the couch as soon as he gets here."

"Did I ever tell you I watched their videos?" Stacy asks as Kyle hands her a glass of wine.

"Yes, you've told me."

"Kenny is hung, my friend."

"Ew, don't!" Kyle winces and waves his hands in front of his face. "Don't tell me that. He's like my brother-son hybrid."

"Is that some kind of mountain town thing?" Stacy asks, grinning. She grew up in New Haven and thinks that everyone from the suburbs of Denver marries their high school sweetheart, something for which Kyle can hardly blame her, considering.

By the time Kyle's parents and Ike arrive with Kenny, Stacy has helped Kyle pick out a playlist for the party, and the two of them have consumed half of the sushi. Butters and Sharon arrive shortly thereafter, followed by Wendy and Cartman, who is bearing a giant tray of sub sandwiches, despite the fact that Kyle told him not to bring food. Kyle checks his phone for messages from Stan, who has been tasked with wrangling his father, but there's nothing. He returns to the party, trying not to worry. Ike has already zeroed in on Stacy, and apparently she's had enough wine to find his lightly baked presence charming, because she's laughing at something he said. Kyle grabs a piece of Cartman's sub and goes to sit beside Kenny on the living room couch.

"Want some food?" Kyle asks, angling the sandwich toward Kenny's mouth. He holds up his hand.

"No," he says, looking grim. "Shit. Why did I smoke with them?"

"I don't know," Kyle says. He takes a bite of the sandwich and slumps back onto the cushions, watching Butters covertly add salt to the hummus. "That was pretty heavy today," Kyle says. "Listening to his speech. I guess I can't blame you for wanting to, uh. Unwind."

"Look at him," Kenny says, lifting a hand in Butters' direction. "How is he so great?"

"I don't know, Kenny." Kyle eats more, though he should really slow down. He's worked hard in the past three weeks to be in good shape for Stan's surprise tonight.

"More importantly, what is he doing with a fuck up like me?" Kenny says.

"You're not a fuck up," Kyle says, shouldering him. "You're his hero."

"That's so demented. What did I ever do for him? Got him involved in porn?"

"You were the one who didn't want to do it at first! He was all for it and you know it."

"But I should have protected him from that part of himself." Kenny winces and pulls at his hair. Kyle sighs, chewing. He's heard this particular lamentation roughly eight hundred times

since he moved to California.

"Weren't you listening to Butters' speech today?" Kyle asks. "He has no regrets. He's doing great, and you're a big part of why."

"Cartman's right, though," Kenny says, mumbling. "I just get high on his dime and hang around. What's the point of me? What am I doing with my life?"

Kyle wants to rant at him for being self-pitying when Butters' money could offer him so many opportunities. He thinks back to four years ago, high school graduation, how Stan pulled him aside at Wall-Mart to make sure he would be careful with Kenny's feelings. Kenny just sat through another graduation ceremony that all of them participated in except for him. Even Wendy and Cartman had their green room duties. Kenny was just there to supply the pot.

"Why don't you get your GED and go to college?" Kyle says, though he's suggested this a thousand times before and Kenny always scoffs. "You might find it really rewarding."

"Kyle, how many times do I have to tell you? I'm enrolled in the school of *life*."

"That's such stoner bullshit! But it's fine, really, if that's what's making you happy. You don't seem happy, though. I mean, what do want to do? What are you interested in?"

"Tanning?" Kenny says, rolling his head toward Kyle's on the couch cushion.

"Oh, please. You like other things. You like music."

"So what am I supposed to do, learn how to play the trombone?"

"Why not? God, Kenny, you could do anything! You're only twenty-two years old, you're rich as fuck, and Butters is the most accepting person in the world, so he'll be happy with whatever you decide. I think it's time to stop feeling sorry for yourself."

Kenny sighs and stares down at his knees, wagging his left one lazily. Kyle checks his phone again, but there's still no word from Stan.

"You know, there is actually something I want to do, but you'll laugh," Kenny says.

"I will not. What is it?"

Kenny looks at him sheepishly. "Film school," he says.

"Why would I laugh at that?"

"'Cause I kind of want to make porn, okay?" Kenny says, sitting up. "Not with me in it, and there's no way in hell I'd let him do it again, but like, quality porn, with *story*. Is that stupid? Does that mean I've learned nothing?"

"It's not stupid at all," Kyle says. "You know how often me and Stan complain that gay porn sucks? It's not even worth making fun of."

"You and Stan talk about porn a lot, huh?" Kenny says, smirking. Kyle elbows him.

"Well, enough that I think there's a market for the discerning gay man," Kyle says. "Oh, Jesus," he says, sitting up and staring down at the remains of his sandwich.

"What?"

"Nothing, it just kind of hit me. Did we *all* really turn out gay?"

"Such is the magic of South Park," Kenny says. "And, hey, there's always Cartman."

Cartman turns from the buffet and narrows his eyes at Kenny.

"Are you assholes talking about me?" he asks.

"Only about how masculine and virile you are," Kenny says. Cartman makes a face.

"Quit checking out my ass, Kenny!"

"How can I?" Kenny says. "It's like an elephant in the room. Literally. It must be addressed."

Cartman goes into the kitchen to make himself a drink, grumbling about pothead hippie losers, and Wendy stomps over to the couch area.

"Hey," she says in a whisper, pointing her finger at Kenny. "Do not tease him about his weight."

"Oh, Jesus, he can take it," Kyle says.

"No, he can't! You guys have to admit he actually looks good. I mean, he's not *thin*, but he's right at 250, and he's very sensitive -"

"I don't fucking believe this," Kenny says.

"He is!" Wendy actually stomps. "He'll go on a binge if he starts to feel insecure, and then he's gained twenty pounds before I can take the Oreos out of his hand, and I'm the one who has to hear him blubbering about how he's a fat ass after a fifth of whiskey - just *don't*, okay?"

"Okay, Jesus," Kenny says, holding up his hands. "Cartman is a sensitive flower, got it."

"Christ, don't act like Butters and Stan haven't given him similar instructions about you two," Wendy says, walking off.

"Wait, what?" Kyle says. "Huh?"

"I don't think she means our weight," Kenny says, slinging his arm around Kyle. "Probably with me it's, like, 'hey, um, Eric, can you please not tease Kenny for not having a high school diploma, he gets real sad about that sometimes.' And for you it'd be like, 'Cartman, you dick, don't you know Kyle still cries about his hair?'"

"I do not!" Kyle says, punching Kenny. He touches his hair self consciously, and it's still wavy, not a frizzy mess. Kenny laughs.

"Seriously, how much did you pay for that relaxer?" Kenny asks. "Two hundred bucks? Two fifty?"

Before Kyle can inform Kenny that he only paid one-forty, *with* tip, the door of the apartment opens and Randy Marsh makes his grand entrance, *Saturday Night Fever*-style.

"We stopped for tequila!" Randy says, hoisting a bottle. Stan walks in behind him, looking exhausted. Kyle hands the remains of his sandwich to Kenny and hurries to Stan.

"I'm fine," Stan says when Kyle hugs him. Randy is already in the kitchen, making Wendy laugh hysterically as he portions out shots.

"Are you sure?" Kyle asks, eying Randy.

"This is just what he's like on vacation," Stan says with a shrug. "Where's my mom?"

"Over there talking to Stacy," Kyle says, indicating the hallway that leads to their bedroom. He thinks of the package under the sink and how close all of his loved ones are to what he's secretly looking forward to. Maybe he should call the whole thing off. Ike walks toward them looking irritated.

"Marsh, your mom is totally cock blocking me," he says.

"What, with Stacy?" Stan snorts. "Don't blame my mom for your lack of game."

"That girl is fine as hell," Ike says, turning to look at her. "And she's so - not South Park-y."

"What's wrong with South Park girls?" Stan asks, and Ike snorts.

"I don't know, Marsh, you tell me. There's got to be some reason half the guys in your grade ended up boning each other instead of the available chicks."

"I think it was our sex ed class," Kyle says. "And something to do with Butters coming to school in a dress."

"For me it was Kyle," Stan says, wrapping his arms around Kyle from behind. He rests his chin on top of Kyle's head, and Kyle grins, because he knows Stan likes it when his hair has this particular texture. "Your brother ruined me for women," he says to Ike, who recoils.

"I'm not going to ask how," Ike says.

"I am," Kyle says, curious. Stan shrugs.

"We had so many sleepovers," Stan says. "I just hated it when you weren't in my bed. I used to wake up and look for you. It was like - when you wake up and you think it's Saturday morning, but then your alarm goes off and you remember it's actually Wednesday, and you have a test, and no clean clothes. That's what it was like, waking up without Kyle."

"Oh, fuck," Ike says, already backing away. "That's adorable, Marsh, really. Keep that kind of shit to yourself, okay?"

"Why does he call you Marsh all of a sudden?" Kyle asks, turning around in Stan's arms.

"I don't know," Stan says. "New York has made him too cool for first names."

"I was thinking about me and you in New York," Kyle says. He stands up on his tiptoes and kisses Stan along the line of his jaw, indifferent to Sheila's staring.

"Yeah?" Stan says. He doesn't seem to be in the mood to act like a proper host, either, lingering in the quiet of the living room with Kyle while everyone else bunches around the food. "You think I'll survive there?"

"Oh, sure," Kyle says. "You'll have a Jersey boy to protect you."

"Jersey is tougher than New York?"

"Are you kidding me? Yes. And anyway, I think South Park's tougher than both of them put together."

Stan smiles like this is the greatest compliment Kyle could have given him. They kiss near the bookshelf with the trophies, probably for an inappropriate amount of time, and Kyle breaks away grinning, pulling Stan toward the party.

By the end of the night, Kyle is very glad he over-ordered on food, and glad for Cartman's sandwich tray, too. Between the munchies and the nervous energy that keeps everyone gathered around the kitchen bar, they devour almost everything, just a few cheese cubes and *crudités* remaining. Kyle ends up drinking too much, so he makes coffee, still thinking of his package under the sink as people begin to migrate toward the door.

"Thanks for having me," Stacy says when she hugs Kyle goodbye. She's the first one to make for the exit, but the others seem ready to follow her lead.

"Thanks for not making out with my jail bait brother," Kyle says, and she laughs.

"You were worried about that, huh?"

"He's got a history with intelligent older women. Don't ask. Drive safe!"

"C'mere you," Kenny says when Stacy is gone, pulling Kyle against him. He's out of it from some combination of his hangover, the earlier pot, and the wine and coffee he consumed during the party.

"It sure was a nice party," Butters says, and Kenny moves from Kyle to Butters, flopping against his back. "And thanks for letting me speak today," Butters says. "That was a real honor."

"It wasn't entirely up to me, but you're welcome," Kyle says. "Were you serious about trying to work out of New York?"

"Oh, sure!" Butters says. "The Big Apple! That'd be real exciting."

"Good. 'Cause I'm pretty sure I can't function without your Sunday dinners."

"Let's all get a penthouse together at the top of the Empire State Building," Kenny says, slurring. "Problem solved."

"I'd better get him home," Butters says, walking backward with Kenny still draped around his shoulders. "Night, fellas."

"Call me tomorrow, dude," Kyle says to Kenny, who waves in acknowledgement, though he seems to be in the process of falling asleep on Butters as they walk off together. Cartman is in a similar state when he leaves with Wendy, and she has to pry a handful of cheese cubes out of his palm on the way out the door.

"Thanks for having us," she says. "And congratulations, guys. I'm really proud of both of you."

"Have fun in Jew York if we don't see you before then," Cartman calls.

"Yeah, okay," Kyle calls after him. "Go sleep it off, fuh- freak." He can't believe he's censoring himself to save Cartman's feelings. Wendy turns back to give him an appreciative smile before they disappear around the corner.

The families leave next, everyone talking over each other with plans for breakfast together in the morning. Randy specifies that it should be a *late* breakfast, and Kyle agrees. Stan offers to drive Kyle's family to their hotel, but the whole group is going to share a cab, and Kyle is relieved to hear it, though Stan remained fairly sober throughout the evening and seems fine to drive. Kyle can't wait much longer to give him his surprise.

"Jesus," Stan says when the door is shut and bolted. "Now I remember why we're antisocial."

"We're not that antisocial," Kyle says. He walks to Stan and loops his arms around Stan's neck, standing up tall to kiss him. "We have Kenny and Butters. And Stacy! Though I think she's only friends with me because she wants to bone you."

"She does not," Stan says. He seems to think that his attractiveness to women died off when he quit football, even though most of his customers at the cell phone store are female. "Anyway, fuck that. *I* want to bone *you*." He's walking backward toward the bedroom, pulling Kyle with him, perhaps a little more drunk than Kyle realized.

"Do you remember my text from earlier?" Kyle asks.

"The graduation present?" Stan says.

"Uh-huh."

"That was real? I thought you were just trying to make me feel better."

"Nope, it's real. Can you guess what it is?"

Stan thinks for a moment, and Kyle's heart pounds. They're in the bedroom now, and neither of them puts on the light.

"Does it have to do with sex?" Stan asks.

"Duh, Stanley." Kyle pulls Stan's shirt off for him, throwing it onto the floor. "You really don't know?"

"Um, can I have a hint?"

"Nope." Kyle pushes Stan onto the bed and grins when he bounces. "Just get undressed. I'll be right back." He heads for the bathroom, hoping Stan will just assume he needs to pee. He's not sure if he's glad or disappointed that Stan can't guess what the surprise is. It was Stan's idea, but that was a long time ago, and maybe he wasn't serious when he requested it. Kyle had promised to do anything for him if he would just try to pass his math classes and graduate on time with Kyle. Another separation was out of the question, and Kyle was already planning on law school, knowing he would have to start right away. He didn't want to be bogged down by geographical concerns again, couldn't imagine more stress along those lines after what they went through during their first semester of college and the whole transferring process. When Stan settled on something Kyle would have to give him if he managed to pull off a timely graduation, they both laughed. At that point, Kyle had no plans to actually do it, but over the years his mind kept returning to it, until he guiltily admitted to himself that he wants it, badly, and wants Stan to go crazy for it.

Closed inside the bathroom, he looks at himself in the mirror and takes a deep breath. He hopes this thing will still fit after all the junk food and alcohol he consumed today. He's sweating as he digs it out from under the bathroom sink, where it weathered the party unharrassed. He's looked at it countless times since it arrived last week, whenever Stan was out of the apartment, but he's never had the nerve to try it on. Spreading it out on the counter while Stan waits on the other side of the door makes him feel like he's about to walk out onto a stage like the one he crossed while he accepted his diploma, sun-lit and watched by thousands of people. He reapplies deodorant and reminds himself that this is just for Stan, and that even if he laughs, Kyle can play it off like a big joke and forget the whole thing.

He turns around after he's dressed, checking the fit. The custom embroidery makes him blush, and he wonders if he shouldn't have left that part off. Too late now. He braces himself before adding the final touch. At some point he decided actual pom poms would be over the top, but two tiny green bows tied around particularly fluffy waves in his hair seemed like a good idea, once. Now he's not so sure, watching a full body blush creep down his neck and onto his chest.

"Everything alright in there?" Stan calls from the bedroom.

"Yeah," Kyle says. He takes another deep breath and walks to the door. This is stupid. He shouldn't do it. But Stan asked for it, and Kyle wants it, and here he goes. He cracks open the door just enough to stick his head out, not remembering the bows until it's too late.

"What are you doing?" Stan asks. He seems to notice the bows and smiles, confused. "I thought you were sick or something."

"I'm not sick," Kyle says, still hiding the rest of himself behind the door. "Or maybe I am. No - but - you might think -"

"Dude, what the hell?"

"Okay!" Kyle winces. "Remember - remember that one night when you were having a really hard time with Calculus, and you said you were going to fail, and I calculated that you couldn't if you wanted to graduate on pace with me?"

"Yeah," Stan says. He's stretched out on the bed in the dark room, wearing only his boxers. "What does that have to do with - whatever's happening?"

"Don't you remember?" Kyle promised himself he wouldn't be angry if Stan forgot, but he's already feeling hurt. "I said that if you passed that class, if you graduated on time with me, you could have anything -"

"Oh, shit." Stan sits up abruptly, his eyes going wide. "Seriously - seriously?"

"Oh, forget it, it's dumb!"

"Kyle, no, c'mere. Come - let me see."

Kyle moans and opens the door slowly, letting Stan see him. He wants to turn off the bathroom light, to throw the whole bedroom into darkness, but it's too late. Stan's eyes are crawling up and down his body, taking it in.

"Shit," Stan says, under his breath. He's not laughing. He just seems stunned. "I never thought –"

"I'll take it off," Kyle says, pulling down on the ridiculously short skirt. It's a South Park Cows cheerleading uniform, the thing Stan asked for when Kyle offered anything he wanted. Stan was joking, probably, and Kyle is an idiot for getting so fixated, for thinking Stan would really want this.

"Don't," Stan says when Kyle starts to turn. "Don't take it off. Jesus, c'mere. Fuck, Kyle."

"What? No, it's – I shouldn't have." His face is so hot, his knees pressing together. "You were joking –"

"I – maybe I thought I was. But I wanted – I always wanted it to be you. Get your ass over here."

"You wanted it to be me?" Kyle walks closer to the bed, toying with the end of the skirt. He's never wanted to be a girl, or to dress like one, but ever since Stan asked for this he's wanted to give it to him.

"After my games." Stan holds his arms out. "It wasn't enough to go to your house and get in bed with you when you were already asleep, or to sneak back to our place after everyone had stopped paying attention to me. I wanted you to be there, I wanted everyone to watch – Kyle –" Stan stops waiting for Kyle to get into the bed and crawls over to pull him into it. Kyle

moans, still self-conscious, and kneels in front of Stan, his flush spreading all the way down to his thighs.

"I just wanted to show you how proud I am of you for finishing your program," Kyle says. "Even after all the football shit, all the crap you've had to go through." He puts his hands on Stan's shoulders and shivers when Stan's hands settle on his waist, because he's given a lot of thought to the way Stan would hold him while he's wearing this thing, careful and awestruck. "I'm *this* proud of you, okay? Enough to make an ass of myself."

"Are you crazy?" Stan kisses Kyle's cheeks, his hands sneaking up under the hem of the tiny shirt. He still hasn't noticed the most incriminating feature. "You look amazing." His hands slide up over the back of the shirt, and Kyle's heart pounds, because there's no going back now. Stan's fingers pause when he's touching the M on one side of Kyle's back, the H on the other. Kyle watches Stan's eyes change as he feels his way over the letters.

"Turn around for a second," Stan says. "Is that –"

There's no part of Kyle's body that isn't stained pink when he pulls away from Stan and turns around, standing up in the middle of the bed to show him the back of his uniform. Nobody gets a name printed on the back of a cheerleading uniform, apparently, but Kyle always envisioned it this way, and he paid extra for these five letters.

"My name," Stan says. Kyle keeps his back turned, afraid to look at him.

"I thought—" Kyle says, and then he doesn't know how to continue. He feels the bed shift as Stan gets up, and then Stan's hands are on his shoulders, turning him around. Kyle stares at Stan's chest, watching him take one deep breath, and another. He drags his eyes up Stan's.

"I've been thinking about it all day," Stan says. "Since the ceremony, since you had to stand in a different section."

"What?" Kyle says. He's forgotten what he's wearing, feels more naked than he's ever been.

"About – how I want you to have my last name," Stan says. The mattress is trembling under their feet. Kyle thought they would either laugh this off or have crazy sex. His mouth is dry, and he thinks of how angry he got with Stan that day when he came to Kyle's dorm to confess, because Stan could have had everything, all that time, and he just wouldn't reach out and take it.

"It's legal in New York," Kyle says, his voice barely working, and that's when Stan drops onto one knee.

"Kyle," Stan says.

"No, wait!" Kyle kneels down in front of him, his hands sliding up to Stan's shoulders. "I have to be on my knees, too."

"Yeah?" Stan's smile is shaky.

"Just because I'm wearing a skirt, don't make me the girl." Kyle scoots closer, until their noses are touching, his arms looping around Stan's neck. "This is my proposal, okay?"

"Oh." Stan hiccups out some combination of a laugh and a sob. "I thought it was mine." He wraps his arms around Kyle's waist and pulls him forward so that Kyle's stomach is flush against his. Kyle leans back to study Stan's face.

"I can't wait to tell this story when people ask," Kyle says.

"What, how we got engaged?" Stan laughs, and there's relief in it, like he was actually worried that Kyle would say no.

"'Oh, it was somewhere between the moment when I walked out of the bathroom wearing a cheerleading uniform and the crazy sex.'"

"There's crazy sex?" Stan says, smiling wider.

"Well, yeah. This outfit isn't purely ceremonial."

The sex isn't actually crazy, but it's good, their eyes locked and their kisses long and slow, Kyle still mostly wearing the outfit. He ends up only staining the underside of the skirt when he comes, and he's pleased with this for about two seconds before he loses his mind to how hard Stan starts fucking him when he sees this: Kyle in a come-stained cheerleading uniform, wrecked by his orgasm, the bows in his hair coming loose. Apparently it's Stan's thing after all, no joke. Stan whimpers at the start of his climax and groans through the rest, pressing so deep into Kyle when he unloads that Kyle gasps and closes around him like a sprung trap. They're both holding on hard in the aftermath, tired and panting their breath, rib cages knocking together.

"You're really going to marry me?" Stan asks before he's even pulled out, leaning up onto his elbows. Kyle huffs.

"You really thought I wouldn't? Have you seen what I'm wearing?"

"That's – I thought maybe, 'cause I'm not Jewish -"

"Seriously, Stan?"

"Well – no, but, ah, I don't know. You're – and I'm – I don't have any prospects."

"What – *job* prospects?" Kyle laughs, and Stan slides out of him. Kyle pulls Stan down to him when he tries to move away, and they're in a heap again, faces pressed together. "I never loved you for your prospects," Kyle says. "That was everybody else, all those football stadiums full of people. They loved you for how far you were going to go. I loved you anyway, before the snap, at the 50. I loved you when you ate crayons."

"But I don't want to be a loser," Stan says. "I don't want to be – I mean, not to be a jerk, but I don't want to be Kenny. You deserve more than that."

"You're not going to be a loser." Kyle pushes the skirt down over his hips, wiggling out of it. This is a serious conversation, and he should be naked for the occasion. He takes off the uniform shirt more carefully, dislodging one of the bows in the process, and lays the shirt out so that the MARSH on the back is showing. He doesn't bother to undo the other bow.

"What if New York eats me alive, though?" Stan asks when Kyle lies beside him again. "Your mom thinks it will, I can tell. Did you hear her earlier? She kept asking me if I considered Los Angeles a *real city*."

"Don't listen to her," Kyle says. "She's just jealous. She knows we're gonna have a great time in New York, and she's stuck in South Park."

"I don't just want to have a great time, though," Stan says. "I want to figure out what to do with my life."

"You will, dude! I believe in you, okay?" Kyle kisses him, beginning to feel sleepy as Stan's tongue slides against his. "You don't have to win trophies for me," Kyle says, whispering this against Stan's lips. He smiles.

"They were for you," Stan says. "That's why I wanted you in this." He rolls onto his stomach and touches the uniform shirt, smoothing it out reverently. "Are you really going to take my last name?"

"With a hyphen," Kyle says.

"That's so New York."

"You know what would really piss our parents off?" Kyle asks, grinning at the thought. Stan raises his eyebrows.

"I'm afraid to ask," he says.

"Kenny should officiate!" Kyle tugs on Stan's elbow when he only stares at him in response. "C'mon, it'd be hilarious. My mom would flip."

"Already this wedding is about pissing off your mother?"

"No, this wedding is about us and what we want. Haven't you always envisioned Kenny doing our ceremony? He was our biggest fan from back in the day, dude."

"That's true." Stan rolls Kyle into his arms. "Ike should be our ring bearer," he says.

"Whatever, he's my best man!"

"Then who's mine? You're my best friend. I mean, there's Kenny, but apparently he's the minister, so that leaves who? Wendy?"

"Better than Cartman. And I think this arrangement makes Butters the ring bearer, actually."

"Or the caterer."

"Well, both?"

They crawl under the blankets and stay up late whispering about their wedding, laughing like kids planning a water balloon attack. Kyle wants it to be in the fall, when the leaves are pretty, maybe in Mel and Laura's wooded backyard. Stan wants a chocolate cake with caramel frosting, which makes Kyle laugh, because that's what Butters served last time they were over at the house.

"What?" Stan says. "It was really good!"

When Stan finally falls asleep, Kyle spoons himself back against him and pulls Stan's arm across his chest like another blanket. It's his throwing arm, the one that was broken, the one that brought him to tears that were broadcast across the internet as Kyle kissed his cheeks dry. Maybe they should have been more careful, but Kyle couldn't stop himself that day at the physical therapy center, and Stan had held onto Kyle's elbows, keeping him close while Kyle whispered that he could do this, that everything would be fine. Kyle pulls Stan's knobby knuckles up to his lips and kisses them, unable to sleep for all the plans that are rushing through his mind. He wonders if they should tell everyone tomorrow morning at breakfast. Yes, of course they should. He can't even wait that long to tell Kenny, so he reaches for his phone on the nightstand, tucking himself back into Stan's arms while he types out the news. He sends and tosses the phone away, rolls over and sleeps with his face hidden in Stan's chest, dreaming about licking caramel frosting from his fingers.

In the morning they wake early but slowly, nuzzling at each other with irritable fondness, legs sliding together under the blankets. Stan plays with the mostly undone ribbon in Kyle's hair.

"Did I dream it?" Stan asks. Kyle shakes his head.

"I said yes. And I was wearing a Cows cheerleading uniform when I did, if that's the part you think you dreamed."

Stan yawns and stretches, and Kyle thinks about having sex but still feels a little exhausted after last night, which was fairly epic. He reaches for his phone on the nightstand and grins as he reads Kenny's response to the news of the engagement.

bout time broseph-lovsky

There's a second message that came just a few minutes later, shortly after four o'clock in the morning:

butters is so excited oh man he is drawing cake designs

"They're going to take over the plans for this wedding, aren't they?" Stan says, reading over Kyle's shoulder.

"Well, Butters might," Kyle says. He puts the phone on the nightstand again. "And Wendy, if you get her involved. Oh, God, if she's your best man, does that mean Cartman is going to attend our fucking wedding?"

"It would almost be weird if he didn't," Stan says.

"By what logic?"

"I don't know, he was there the whole time. He witnessed the magic."

Kyle uses his phone to make a preliminary guest list, and he starts to get texts from Butters before he can finish, with questions about what their colors will be, how they feel about fondant icing and whether or not they're going to have a theme.

"What are our colors?" Kyle asks. He could stay in bed like this all day, his knees propped up under the blankets, Stan's chin on his shoulder. He could get married like this, naked and cozy.

"Green and blue," Stan says.

"What, like, planet earth? Or a mermaid?"

"Fine, you pick!"

Kyle thinks about all the colors that were involved with their courtship. White, certainly, for the snow. Gold from Stan's Bruins helmet and his trophies. Green, too, for Kyle's ushanka, the South Park Cows, and Stan's tree hugging tendencies.

"How about green and white on the cake, and gold accents on the invitations?" Kyle says.

"Sounds good," Stan says. "As long as I get to wear a bad ass powder blue tux like the one Kenny wore to prom."

"Fine, and I'll wear the cheerleading outfit."

"Perfect."

Kyle tackles him, and they end up having lazy sex, during which they ignore numerous calls to both their cell phones, and after which Kyle takes the bow out of his hair and ties it into Stan's.

"You should go to breakfast like this," Kyle says, smoothing Stan's hair down around the bow-tied section.

"My dad would cry," Stan says.

"Let me take a picture," Kyle says, crawling across the bed to get his phone.

"No way, dude!"

"Yes, way! We need to commemorate this moment!"

Stan allows Kyle to take two pictures, and the helpless sulk on his face makes Kyle laugh until he nearly falls off the bed. They start returning phone calls about the breakfast plans,

and Kyle takes another picture of Stan, covertly, just because he can't believe Stan hasn't taken the bow out yet.

In the coming years, this will be the picture that pops up when Stan calls Kyle's cell: Stan with a little green bow in his hair, talking on the phone, a pitifully resigned expression on his face as he assures his father that, yes, the brunch service will include Bloody Marys. Kyle will smile every time he sees it, and will be able to say, when he steps away from whatever he was doing, *Hang on, I should take this, it's my husband*.

(the end)

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